ELLERY QUEEN

THE WORLD'S LEADING MYSTERY MAGAZINE

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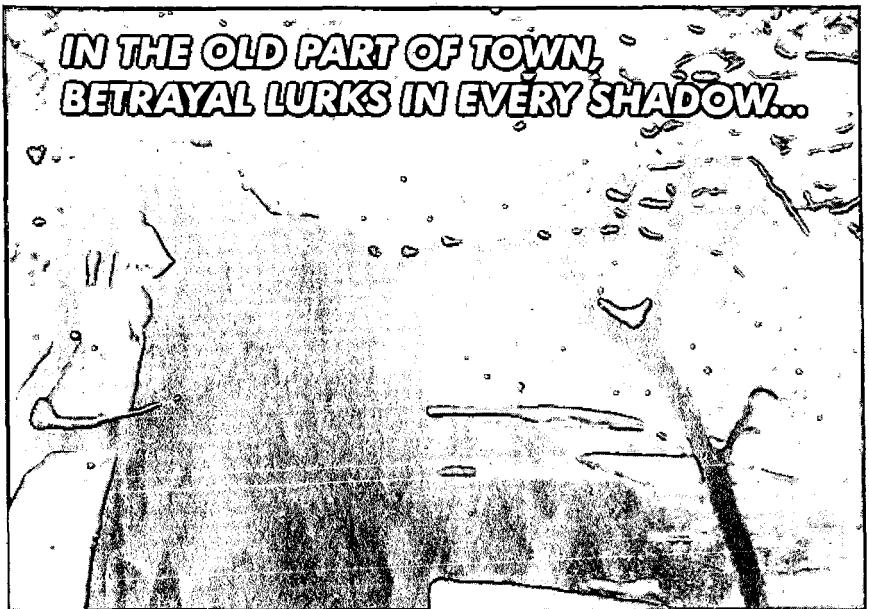

THE MAN WHO RISKED HIS PARTNER

by REED STEPHENS

It seemed like a routine case: protect a man who claimed his life was being threatened. Mick "Brew" Axbrewder and Ginny Fistoulari—head of Fistoulari Investigations—couldn't understand why every other agency in town had turned it down flat. But they found out soon enough...and suddenly there was more at stake than they ever bargained for.

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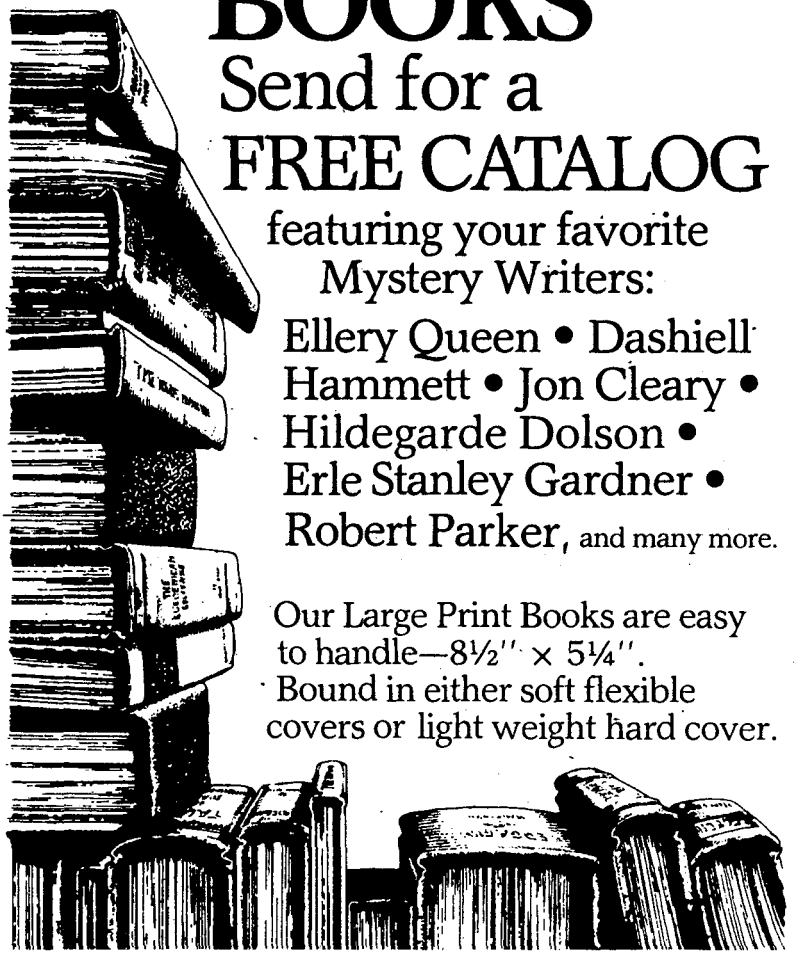

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a *NEW* Dr. Sam Hawthorne story by

EDWARD D. HOCH

The high point of the centennial celebration was the grand opening of the Northmont Cinema, which seated four hundred and thirty people in comfort and even had a little soundproof room in back for families with babies or small children . . .

THE PROBLEM OF THE CRYING ROOM

by EDWARD D. HOCH

"Come in, come in!" Dr. Sam Hawthorne said. "Will you have the usual libation? Good! I promised to tell you about our centennial locked room this time, didn't I? Northmont in those days was a great place for celebrations. We'd already had a tercentennial in the summer of '27 to mark an early pilgrim settlement, and now in the summer of '32 we were marking the centennial of Northmont's incorporation as a village. It was a time of Depression, and a year of presidential election, and I suppose the town fathers thought a celebration was just what we needed . . ."

For most people (Dr. Sam continued), the high point of the centennial celebration was to be the opening of the Northmont Cinema, our very first talking-picture palace. It was like a step into the future for us, and far more important to most residents than the opening of Pilgrim Memorial Hospital had been a few years earlier. Mayor Trenton had already agreed to cut the ribbon on opening day, Wednesday, June 29th, as part of a week-long celebration climaxing with fireworks on July 4th, the following Monday.

I stopped by the Cinema on Tuesday, the day before the grand

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opening. The signs were already in place out front announcing the first double bill: *Winner Take All* with James Cagney and *The Miracle Man* with Chester Morris. Matt Creeley, the owner, was as excited as everyone else in town.

"Let me show you the place, Doc," he urged, taking me by the arm. "We can seat four hundred and thirty people in comfort. That's half the population of Northmont, and I figure we'll draw from as far away as Shinn Corners. They've got nothing like this!"

The auditorium was indeed impressive. "What's this little glassed-in room at the back?" I asked him.

"A soundproof room for families with babies or small children. Sort of a crying room, so they won't disturb the rest of the audience. The sound from the screen comes in through this speaker. There are only a few theaters in the country that have one of these." His voice was filled with pride.

"You've certainly done a fine job, Matt," I said, looking over the little room, which had a dozen seats. We went down the center aisle and I glanced back over my shoulder. "That's the projection booth up there?"

"Right. I'll be running the projectors sometimes, but Freddie Bay is going to be my official projectionist."

"Think you can keep him sober?" Freddie was the town character, drunk more often than sober even though Prohibition was still the law of the land.

"He's been pretty good lately, Doc. I been teaching him how to run the projector and he's really taking an interest in it."

"I'm glad to hear it," I told him. Freddie Bay rented a room over the barber shop on Main Street and I often saw him on my way to the office.

On the way out, a pretty dark-haired girl came up with a question for Creeley. He turned to me. "You know Vera Smith, don't you, Sam?"

"I don't believe I do." I'd heard he'd hired a ticket-seller from Shinn Corners, but no one had mentioned she was so attractive.

"Vera, this is Dr. Sam Hawthorne. You get a sprained wrist from taking in all that money, Doc's the one you call."

She gave me an appealing smile. "I hope that won't happen."

"Do you live in town?" I asked as if I didn't know better.

"Shinn Corners. I drive over in my auto."

"This is a good job. You're in on the ground floor."

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"So Mr. Creeley keeps telling me," she replied.

"I still have to hire a couple of boys to be ushers," Creeley said, "but I'll do that this afternoon. I ran an ad in the paper this morning."

"I wish you the best of luck."

"Here are a couple of passes for opening night, Doc. Bring a girl friend."

"Thanks very much."

That summer there were no women in my life, so when I returned to the office I asked my nurse April if she'd like to accompany me. "Tomorrow night?" she asked. "When Mayor Trenton cuts the ribbon and everything?"

"That's right."

"I'd love it! But what would I wear? In the magazines they wear formal clothes to movie openings."

"Not in Northmont, we don't. That dress you wore to—"

The telephone interrupted us. It was Sheriff Lens and he sounded excited. "Doc, you gotta come over here quick. I've got a body."

"Where are you, Sheriff?"

"Up in Freddie Bay's apartment above the barber shop. He just committed suicide."

The apartment was dusty and sparsely furnished—the sort of place I'd have expected Freddie to live in. There was a half empty bottle of bootleg Scotch on the dining-room table. Freddie was sprawled in an easy chair nearby, a revolver on the floor beneath his right hand. "Shot himself in the head," Sheriff Lens muttered.

I inspected the bloody wound in his temple. "Powder burns. It looks like suicide all right, Sheriff."

"Woman across the hall heard the shot about an hour ago. She tried knocking on his door and when no one answered she telephoned me."

"I wonder why poor Freddie would kill himself."

"Oh, he left a suicide note, Doc. Damndest thing you ever saw!"

I took the shakily written note and read it quickly: *I killed Mayor Trenton at the opening night of the Northmont Cinema. I hated him because he always had the cops after me for my drinking. I'd drilled a hole in the floor of the projection booth through the ceiling of the crying room. When the mayor went in to try it out, I made a noise so he looked up at the ceiling and I shot him between the eyes. I put putty in the hole so no one could see it, and nobody knew how he could have been shot while he was alone in that room. I could have*

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gotten away with it, but my conscience wouldn't let me. I'm taking this way out. Freddie Bay.

"But—"

"Exactly, Doc. The opening isn't till tomorrow night, and Mayor Trenton is alive. Freddie confessed to a murder that hasn't been committed yet."

Freddie Bay's suicide note was put down to the ramblings of an alcoholic, and Mayor Trenton dismissed it with a laugh. "Maybe he was planning to kill me and he got so drunk he thought he'd done it."

Sheriff Lens and I personally inspected the floor of the projection booth and the ceiling of the room below without finding any indication of a hole. If Freddie had been serious about his plan, he hadn't yet carried out the crucial first step.

"What am I going to do without a projectionist?" Matt Creeley fumed, running a hand through his thinning hair. "I'll have to run the projectors myself when I should be down here greeting people."

"It'll work out," Sheriff Lens assured him.

"And what if the mayor is scared off and doesn't show up to cut the ribbon?"

"Nothing's ever scared off Ernie Trenton," Lens assured him. "And why should this? The would-be killer is already dead."

But as we were leaving the theater, I asked the sheriff: "You're going to be here for the opening, aren't you?"

"I sure am, but not because of this business. The wife and I just want to see a couple of good moving pictures, right here in town." He squinted at me. "You're not worried, are you?"

"Not really."

"Then what is it, Doc? I can tell when something's not right with you."

"I was just thinking about that half empty bottle of bootleg Scotch. You know how Freddie liked to drink. If he was going to kill himself, don't you think he'd have finished off the bottle first?"

"Maybe," Sheriff Lens admitted. "But if somebody killed him and is planning to kill the mayor, they wouldn't be dumb enough to leave that suicide note and warn us about it."

"I don't know," I admitted. "I don't know what to think."

The afternoon of the opening was bright with sunshine, a warm summer's day that seemed made for a celebration. The whole town

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square had been decorated for the centennial, and Mayor Trenton wasn't the only politician taking advantage of it. I spotted Casper Drake, a town selectman and political foe of Trenton's, shaking a few hands.

He saw me and called out, "Doc Hawthorne! Wait up a minute!"

"How are you, Casper?" He was a thin man with an ulcer problem I'd been treating off and on over the years.

"Good as can be expected. Tell me, what's this about Freddie Bay shooting himself?"

"That seems to be what happened. He left a suicide note."

"Seems mighty strange. Creeley had just given him a job at his new theater."

"I know." I was reluctant to add anything else, hoping the contents of the note hadn't yet become general knowledge.

"Are you going to the opening tonight?"

"I wouldn't miss it. I'll see you there, Casper."

April was ready when I picked her up in my Stutz Torpedo a little after seven o'clock, and at that time of the year there was still plenty of daylight as we drove around the square and parked near the new theater. Even though the Fourth of July was five days off, there were kids with firecrackers and cap pistols celebrating early over by the bandstand. Somehow it added a festive air to the evening's activities, and though I saw Sheriff Lens standing at the curb glaring at them he made no effort to interfere with their play.

"Good to see you Doc—April," he said as we left the car.

"Is your wife here, Sheriff?" April asked.

"She's inside, saving a couple of seats. I figured I should be out here when the mayor makes it official."

Since the opening-night audience was made up of invited guests, Vera Smith didn't need to be in the box office. Instead, she stood beside Matt Creeley in the doorway, accepting passes from people as they went in. When Creeley spotted Mayor Trenton out front, he called a temporary halt to admissions and we all gathered around while a symbolic red ribbon was stretched across the entrance.

"Friends and fellow townspeople," the beefy mayor began, as if he were campaigning for re-election, "it's a pleasure to be here this evening for one of the banner events of this centennial summer—the grand opening of the Northmont Cinema, our very first motion-picture theater." He lifted the scissors and snipped the ribbon as the crowd cheered.

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We all filed inside after him and I noticed Casper Drake lean over to whisper something to Vera Smith as he passed. Whatever it was, she blushed and smiled. April and I found aisle seats about halfway back, waving to the sheriff's wife at the other end of the same row. Sheriff Lens himself appeared after a moment, catching me by the elbow.

"Doc, I got a problem. Mayor Trenton wants to watch the first half of the movie from the crying room."

I had to smile. "You're not superstitious, are you, Sheriff? We went over that room and there are no holes in the ceiling. Besides, whether Freddie's confession was serious or not, the man is dead."

He shook his head. "I just don't like it, tempting fate like that."

"I'll go back and talk to him," I told him. April promised to save my seat, but she was so excited watching the crowd I wasn't going to count on it.

Trenton was standing with Matt Creeley and Casper Drake, admiring the theater's interior. Matt was the first one to tell me, "Doc, if the mayor really wants to watch the movie from the crying room, I wonder if you could sit with him. I have to be up in the projection booth running the film, and I'd feel better if the sheriff kept a watch on the door from outside."

"I think you're all being foolish," Trenton said, and I had to agree with him. "I only want to sit there for five or ten minutes to get the feel of the room. Then I'll come out and join the rest of you." It crossed my mind that he might be playing to the women's vote, though there were no young families invited to test the room on opening night.

"I'll sit with you for that long," I agreed. "Let's go."

Matt Creeley, smiling at last, motioned to Vera. "Tell the ushers to stand in the back during the show. I don't want their heads blocking the screen."

We entered the glass-fronted room and took seats in the first row. The soundproof paneling gave my ears an eerie feeling and I started out talking in a whisper until I remembered we couldn't be heard outside. "Nice thick glass," I said. "It must have cost Creeley a chunk."

Mayor Trenton nodded. "Boston's got nothing on us."

"Where's your wife tonight?" I asked, making conversation. Hilda Trenton was a pleasant middle-aged woman who usually accompanied the mayor to civic events.

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"I expected her here before this. She had to visit her mother in Shinn Corners this afternoon."

"Shinn Corners. That's where Vera, the ticket-seller, is from."

Trenton grunted. "I thought she looked familiar. Maybe I've seen her over there."

The house lights dimmed and the fancy red curtains parted. The audience applauded as the first black-and-white images appeared on the screen. Above our heads, music flowed through a corner speaker. I saw Sheriff Lens glance in at us through the window and wave. "These are good seats," I said to the mayor. "Creeley should probably put carpeting on the floor, though."

Trenton grunted, his eyes on the screen.

The second feature was shown first. It was the story of a gang of crooks reformed by a faith healer. Mayor Trenton seemed to know there'd been a previous silent version with Lon Chaney. After less than ten minutes, he showed impatience and suggested we move out with the rest of the audience. "I should take a look around for Hilda. She's probably here by now."

On the screen one of the characters had drawn a gun. Trenton was just starting to rise when I heard a muffled crack, like a shot fired some distance away. I thought it was on the screen, but beside me the mayor gasped. "Oh, my God! I've been shot!" He toppled back into his seat and I saw him grasp at the fleshy part of his chest below the left shoulder. "Let me see," I said, pulling away his coat. There was blood on his shirt, and a hole where the bullet had entered.

Just then the door opened and Sheriff Lens poked his head in. "Mayor, your wife just arrived. Should I bring her in here?"

"He's been shot!" I shouted. "Get help!"

"Shot? How could he be? He was alone in here with you, Doc. I've been outside the door all the time."

"Maybe Freddie Bay did it," I muttered. "Just get the lights on so I can see what I'm doing here."

Hilda Trenton was close to hysteria after hearing the news. "Is he going to die? I want to see him! I want to be with him!"

"You can see him," I told her. "We're going to take him to the hospital, but he'll be all right. Luckily, he was starting to rise just as the shot was fired. Otherwise it might have struck the side of his head."

"But how—?"

Sheriff Lens was helping the mayor to his feet. The film had

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stopped and the house lights were turned on. I knew an ambulance would be on its way from Pilgrim Memorial Hospital. "Just take it easy, Mayor," I cautioned. "It looks like a flesh wound to me, but we can't be sure yet."

His face had gone white and I feared he might be going into shock. I hoped the ambulance wouldn't take too long. Casper Drake appeared from the audience, trying to get through to us. "What happened? Is he dead?"

"He's very much alive, Casper. Keep everyone back, will you?"

Finally the ambulance arrived and we persuaded Mayor Trenton to lie down on a stretcher. His color was better and though I figured there would probably be no complications, I rode along with him. I told Sheriff Lens, "Check that ceiling again. Look for a hole big enough to admit a bullet. And the walls, too. Those acoustical panels—"

"I'll take care of it, Doc."

Hilda Trenton insisted on riding in the ambulance, and by the time we reached Pilgrim Memorial she was in worse shape than her husband. The staff doctors had been alerted and Trenton was immediately wheeled into the operating room. I scrubbed, put on a mask and gown, and followed along.

The whole thing took only fifteen minutes. Extricating the bullet, Dr. Lask held it up for me to see. "It went in only about an inch," he said. "Either it was fired from a great distance away or it passed through something that slowed its velocity."

"Could it have killed him?"

"Sure, depending on where it hit. He was lucky." He bent back over his work. "A few stitches and he'll be as good as new."

"Hang onto that bullet," I told him. "The sheriff will want it."

I left the operating room and returned to Hilda Trenton, waiting outside.

"Tell me the worst, Dr. Sam," she said. "Is he dead?"

"Hilda, he'll be fine. It's little more than a scratch."

"But someone shot him!"

"Yes."

"Who would do a thing like that?"

"Any politician makes enemies," I answered, thinking about Freddie Bay.

"Then they might try again, even here in the hospital."

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"I'm sure Sheriff Lens will have a deputy guarding his door, Hilda."

I told the sheriff about Hilda Trenton's fears and he explained that he had already ordered a guard for the mayor.

I told him Dr. Lask's comment that it might have been fired through something that slowed its velocity. "The sound of the shot was muffled," I confirmed.

"Like a silencer?"

"I've only heard them in movies, but those are usually more like a cough, or a hiss of air. This was a sharp sound, like a shot, but just not very loud. Of course, the acoustical panels might have affected it."

Sheriff Lens shook his head. "It doesn't make a great deal of difference, Doc. There's no bullet hole in the window or the walls—or the ceiling. And none of the holes in those soundproof tiles are big enough for a bullet. The door may not have been locked like in your classic locked-room mysteries, but it was the next best thing. I was standin' right outside and you were inside. Nobody entered, and the bullet couldn't have entered either. It's impossible, Doc."

"Nothing's impossible if you think about it long enough. Suppose Freddie Bay told the truth about wanting to kill Trenton, but merely lied about the method. Suppose he had some sort of trap set in the crying room well in advance—a gun hidden in one of the seats, or even in that wall speaker, set to go off at a certain time."

"I don't know, Doc—"

"Let's go look."

The shooting of Mayor Trenton had so upset Matt Creeley he had cancelled the rest of the show. He was pacing the empty lobby when we arrived, still looking distraught. "Casper Drake says you had a warning this might happen," he said, confronting us. "Is that true?"

"Well, not exactly," Sheriff Lens replied. "We thought the threat was over."

"This was my big opening and you ruined it for me."

"We didn't ruin it," I reminded him. "The would-be killer did that."

I followed the sheriff into the auditorium where he'd left a deputy on guard by the crying-room door. "It's just as we left it," he told me. "I checked the walls and ceiling but I didn't touch anything."

I could see that. A blood-soaked handkerchief was still on the floor by Trenton's seat along with the navy-blue suitcoat I'd peeled off him after the shooting. Luckily, there wasn't much damage to

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it—only a spot or two of blood on the inner lining. "You can get this jacket back to the mayor," I said. "Is there any chance one of those acoustical panels might move or conceal a tiny door?"

"None, Doc. I tried them all. And I even checked the projection room upstairs."

I got a stepladder and inspected the wall speaker myself. There was no gun inside. Next I felt the upholstery in all the seats—with the same result. The floor of the new theater was virtually spotless. I picked up a tiny piece of red paper, smaller than a toenail, but found nothing else. "A dead end, Sheriff," I decided.

"You're stumped?"

"Maybe. Tell me something. How did Casper Drake know the contents of Freddie's suicide note? He told Creeley there'd been a warning."

"Mayor Trenton mentioned it at a meeting this afternoon. Said he felt like Lincoln going off to the theater tonight."

"Do you think Casper knows something about this business?"

Sheriff Lens waved a hand. "I doubt it. He's more interested in the news from Chicago."

"Chicago?" I'd almost forgotten that the Democratic Convention was in its final day there. New York governor Franklin D. Roosevelt had won the presidential nomination on the fourth ballot and had surprised everyone by flying there to deliver his acceptance speech.

"Roosevelt came out for Repeal in his speech, just like Hoover did two weeks ago. Prohibition is dead, no matter who gets elected."

"How does that affect Casper?"

"Well, I wouldn't want to say—"

"Sheriff, one man is dead and another came close to it tonight. If Casper is involved—"

Sheriff Lens was uncomfortable. "It's just a little side deal I heard about, Doc. There's probably no connection with the shooting tonight. See, if Prohibition is repealed next year, anyone with a big stock of imported liquor will be sitting pretty."

"A bootlegger, you mean?"

"Or someone who imported it legally, using government licenses obtained for medicinal use. I hear tell there's a new drug company doin' just that over in Shinn Corners."

"Shinn Corners?" The place kept popping up. "Is Casper involved with it?"

"Well, that's what I can't prove, Doc, but you don't get those government licenses unless you've got some political pull. The word I

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have is that there's a warehouse in Shinn Corners stocked to the roof with Scotch whisky, just waiting for Repeal. The drug company has Pinkertons guarding it."

We moved back into the lobby, where Vera Smith had joined Creeley. "I'll be heading home if you don't have anything else for me to do," she said.

"Go ahead," the theater owner answered glumly. "Maybe tomorrow will be better."

"Wait a minute, Vera," I called. "I'll walk you to your car."

She got out her keys as we strolled. "Is Mayor Trenton going to be all right?"

"I think so. Luckily, he was starting to stand up just as the shot was fired."

"But who could have done it? And how?"

"We're trying to get to the bottom of it," I said. "You live in Shinn Corners, don't you?"

"That's right."

"I saw you talking earlier to Casper Drake. Do you ever see him around town?"

"Sure, that's how I know him. I see him sometimes in the bank there, or doing some shopping."

"Does he have any business interests there?"

She looked doubtful. "I don't know about that."

I held the door while she climbed behind the wheel of her Ford. "You might ask around town, see if he's connected with a business there."

"All right, if you want." But somehow I didn't think she would.

I watched her drive off and then went back inside. The sheriff was affixing a seal to the crying-room door. "Keep people out for a couple of days," he said, "We'll look at it again tomorrow."

"Got any ideas, Sheriff?"

He looked at me and shook his head. "Hell, Doc, we know who did it. Trouble is, he killed himself yesterday."

I'd been concerned about Mayor Trenton's safety, and so I was relieved to find him out of bed and preparing to go home the next morning. "Thanks for sending over my jacket," he said. "At least I can walk out of here with a bit more dignity than when I came in last night."

"How's the shoulder?"

"Dr. Lask says to come back in ten days and he'll remove the

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stitches. There might be a little seepage of blood for a day or two, he says, but otherwise I'm fine."

Hilda Trenton arrived, smiling and gracious. She'd recovered her composure and was once again the mayor's wife. "Has the sheriff captured the gunman yet?" she wondered.

"He's got a couple of good leads," I lied. Then I added, with a grain of truth, "He's checking something over in Shinn Corners."

Trenton was a bit wobbly from loss of blood, but we got him to the car without difficulty. The deputy followed along, with instructions to remain with the mayor at least through the holiday weekend. Another deputy would be assigned to night duty at their house.

I found Sheriff Lens in the town square, pretending to chase after the kids with their fireworks and cap pistols. "Let them go, Sheriff," I called to him. "There's no law against it."

"They litter up the grass," he complained, stooping to retrieve the remains of a cherry bomb that had just exploded with a deafening blast.

"Mayor Trenton is back home."

"Good." His face took on its familiar perplexed look. "Doc, I was examinin' that bullet they dug out of the mayor's shoulder. All I got's a magnifying glass but the size of the slug and the markings on it look awfully similar to the bullet that killed Freddie Bay."

"Oh?"

"And that gun's been locked in the office safe since Tuesday."

"I see what you mean."

"An impossible shooting in a locked room with a gun that's in my safe!"

"Think you could find me that warehouse in Shinn Corners?"

"Huh?"

"The place with the Scotch whisky."

"I don't know. Maybe. Not too many warehouses over there."

"Then let's go."

"What for? What are you gonna find there, Doc?"

"The last piece of the puzzle. I want to know if that brand of Scotch is the same as the bottle we found in Freddie Bay's apartment."

He stared at me for a moment and then said, "Let's go."

On the drive over, I sorted it all out in my mind until I was sure I knew what had happened. It made sense in a crazy way.

We both knew Sheriff Lens was out of his jurisdiction in Shinn Corners, but he wasn't there to arrest anybody. He located the ware-

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house of the Pilgrim Drug Company without too much difficulty and talked his way past the Pinkerton guards by announcing that I was a doctor come to check on their stock of medicinal whisky.

"I guess it's all right to go in," the guard finally said. "The boss is in there."

"That's just the man we wanted to see," I told him.

He led us down an aisle, past cases of Scotch with the brand name I'd expected. There was a small lighted office at the far end of the building, and as we approached a man came out I didn't know. He frowned and started walking toward us.

"Get out your gun, Sheriff," I whispered.

Behind the stranger, following him out of the office, was Mayor Trenton.

We stood facing each other in an instant of surprise, then Trenton barked a command to the other man. "Shoot them! They're hijackers!"

But Sheriff Lens had reached for his badge instead of his gun. "Now what do you want to say something like that for, Mayor? Call off your Pinkerton boys. I think Doctor Sam here wants to say a few words."

"I do." I stepped forward a bit, facing Mayor Trenton in the narrow aisle. "You almost fooled us, I'll admit. You managed to switch victim and killer most convincingly. Freddie Bay became the killer and you became the victim, when in truth the exact opposite was the case all the time. Freddie knew about your connection with this place, and with Repeal becoming a real possibility for the first time he probably decided to try a little blackmail. You killed him and faked that suicide note in his shaky handwriting after getting him drunk on a bottle of Scotch you'd brought along. You should have poured the rest of it down the drain. That half empty bottle was the first thing to make me suspicious."

"You seem to forget I was shot myself," Trenton said. "I'll have your badge for this, Lens."

The sheriff kept quiet and let me do the talking. "Your shooting was the most bizarre touch. I figured out how you did it, but I can only guess at the reason why. You were afraid Bay had left something—a letter accusing you of using political connections to gain permits for importing Scotch into the country for medicinal purposes. If that letter surfaced after his death, it would make you a prime suspect in his murder as well. How could you kill the blackmailer

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and still be safe? Simply by faking another letter, making it seem as if he planned to kill you and drunkenly thought he'd already carried out his scheme. Then if the real letter turned up it could be dismissed as more drunken ramblings."

"You were right next to me when I was shot," Mayor Trenton reminded me.

"That so-called shooting took a lot of nerve on your part. Just before coming to the theater, you had to stab yourself with something like an icepick in the fleshy part of the shoulder, deep enough so you could work an already-fired bullet into the wound. I hope you sterilized the slug to prevent blood-poisoning. You stuffed a handkerchief against the wound to keep it closed and absorb the blood, and left for the theater. You probably figured that a real shooting, following Freddie's strange confession, would so baffle us that we'd never implicate you in his killing, even if the blackmail letter showed up. But we should have realized from the start that the whole so-called shooting was predicated upon your insistence on watching part of the film from that soundproof room. No would-be killer is likely to have guessed you'd do that, so the crime couldn't have been planned—by Bay or anyone else. Only you could have set it up, Mayor."

"You were seated next to me. You heard the shot."

"I heard an explosive cap, the kind used in a child's cap pistol, dropped by you on the bare floor earlier. As you started to rise, you brought your heel down hard on the cap, setting it off. It was just loud enough to be mistaken for a muffled shot. The burnt cap probably stuck to your shoe, but I did find a tiny red piece of it on the floor. When the cap went off, you pulled the bloody handkerchief free, dropped it on the floor where we found it, and let the blood flow. You'd thought to cut a hole in your shirt where the bullet apparently entered, but you couldn't have a matching hole in your suit jacket where it would be seen. That undamaged jacket gave you away, when I started thinking about it. And today, when I mentioned a clue relating to Shinn Corners, you had to sneak past the deputy assigned to guard you and get over here to see that everything was all right."

"I'm getting out of here," Trenton growled. He turned and ran down a narrow aisle before we realized what was happening.

"Come on!" the sheriff shouted to me, running after him.

We were halfway down the aisle in pursuit before I realized it was

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a trap. Trenton was pushing on a pile of whisky cases, trying to topple them over onto us. He was a mighty ingenious man . . .

"Well," Dr. Sam Hawthorne concluded, "I'm still here so you know I wasn't killed. Neither was Sheriff Lens. The cases fell the wrong way and Mayor Trenton was crushed beneath them. He was dead when we pulled him out. He must have been a little mad those last days to come up with that farfetched scheme and actually wound himself and insert that bullet. We never did tell the town the true story. Bay and Trenton were both gone, and we let it stand as a suicide and a tragic accident. If people wondered what their mayor was doing in a warehouse full of Scotch whisky, they talked about it only in private

"We hadn't heard the last of that warehouse, though. Government agents came to confiscate the Scotch, and the bootleggers moved in to grab it first. Before our centennial summer ended, it caused another murder that seemed just as impossible as the attack on Mayor Trenton."

"Q"

DETECTIVERSE

WED HERRING

by JOHN LARGE

If the votes on the Equal Rights battle
Decreed that the women had won it,
You might think in each new murder novel
The wife of the butler had dunit.

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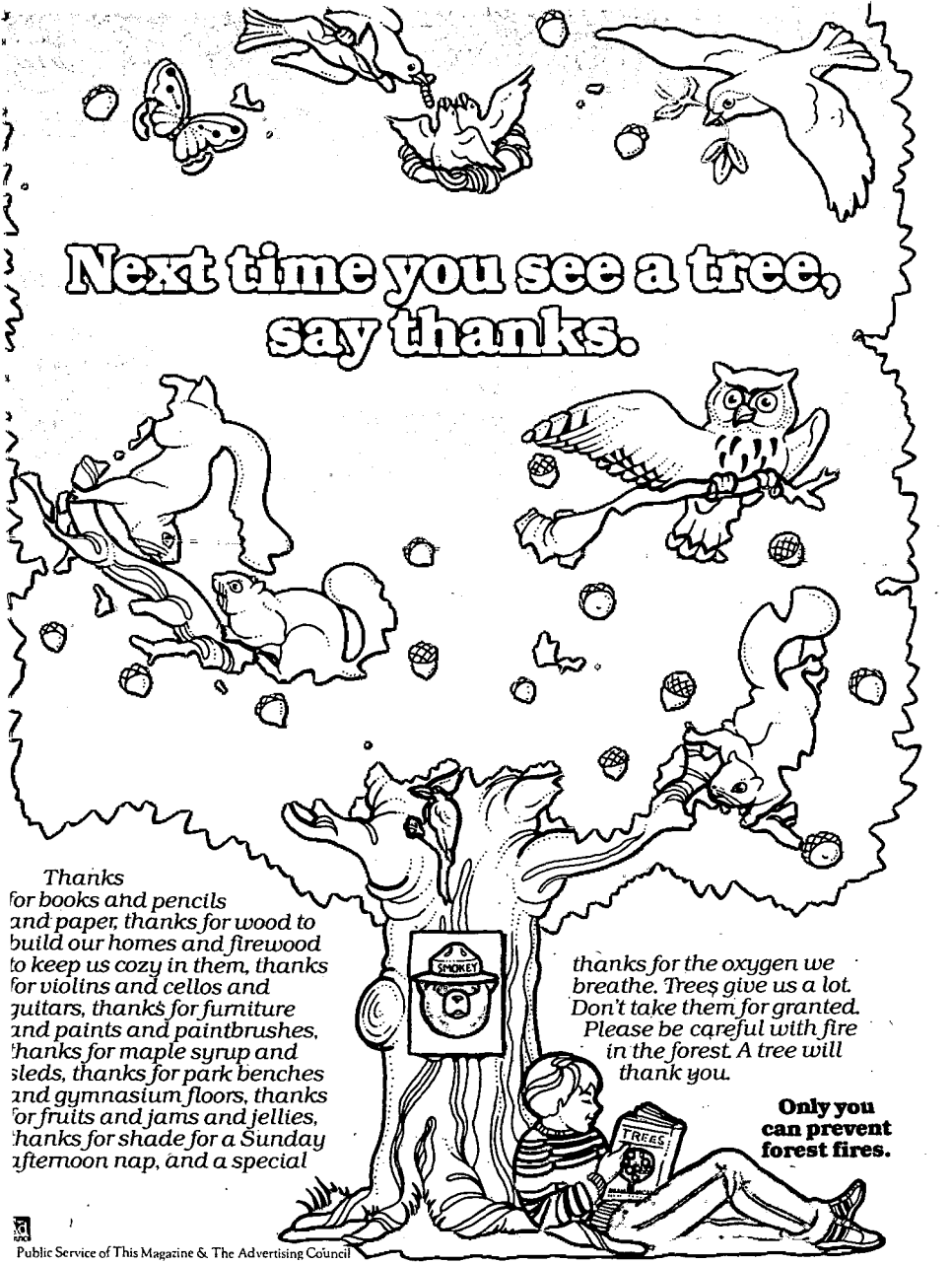
Next time you see a tree, say thanks.



Thanks for books and pencils and paper, thanks for wood to build our homes and firewood to keep us cozy in them, thanks for violins and cellos and guitars, thanks for furniture and paints and paintbrushes, thanks for maple syrup and sleds, thanks for park benches and gymnasium floors, thanks for fruits and jams and jellies, thanks for shade for a Sunday afternoon nap, and a special thanks for the oxygen we breathe. Trees give us a lot. Don't take them for granted. Please be careful with fire in the forest. A tree will thank you.

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a *NEW* Mrs. Craggs story by

H. R. F. KEATING

"Simony," the Rector answered Mrs. Craggs' question, "is generally defined as—er—the buying and selling of ecclesiastical preferment. Something of that sort." Little though he knew it, simony was before long to raise its head in his quiet parish. And Mrs. Craggs, thanks to the clue of the forty-nine hassocks, was to be the one who would cause it so unexpectedly to rear up . . .

A SAD CASE OF SIMONY

by H. R. F. KEATING

The church of St. James the Less, Westminster, occupies only a comparatively modest place among the ecclesiastical delights of London. Yet it is not without its claims. Built between 1860 and 1861, at the cost of the Misses Monk in memory of their father, a former Bishop of Gloucester and Bristol, it was the first religious work in London of the designer G. E. Street.

In its bold brickwork, relieved by bands of sooty black, and its four-square belfry tower capped by a sturdy slate-hung spire and four echoing spirelets, it embodies all the confident vigor of the High Victorian together with a unity of scale that makes it an unassertive work of art. Mrs. Craggs, daily cleaner, in her short acquaintance with the building came to feel for it a strong affection. You could almost have called it love.

Which was, no doubt, why the startling events in its life she was herself responsible for so much upset her, even though her connection with the place lasted no more than three weeks.

At whatever date it may have been that she was employed at the church, which nowadays is merely a junior partner to nearby St. Saviour's, it then had its own Rector, its own curate, and its own

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churchwardens, assisted by their own sidesman. It was to this last that Mrs. Craggs owed her temporary appointment. Up to that year, Mr. Breckinshaw himself had during the summer holiday period, when the volunteer cleaners from among the humbler members of the flock were away, taken over their task.

But now, as the Rector explained to Mrs. Craggs, certain increased responsibilities outside the life of the parish—the Rector was a little uncertain about the exact nature of Mr. Breckinshaw's employment—meant that he could not set the church to rights on Monday mornings after its Sunday use.

"So, my dear lady, since you are happily available, we would be delighted—yes, positively delighted—if you would assist us. At, of course, the customary rate of remuneration. We are not, alas, a wealthy parish—a small dole only in the collection bag each week, I'm afraid, sometimes indeed not exceeding five pounds—but for this short time we can—er—manage. Yes, manage."

"Thank you, sir," said Mrs. Craggs firmly.

The arrangement, though she had no doubt it was altogether imprecise in the Rector's mind, suited her well. She had already seen the inside of the church and she ached to give a really good polish to its long brass altar rail, to the tall narrow brass pillars round the font, to the brass eagle of the reading-stand, and, most of all, to the big, plump-bellied brass ewer used for christenings. And she liked the old Rector, too. He had such clean hands, pink as a new-bathed baby's as he had twiddled and twirled his fingers while they had discussed—without any figure ever being mentioned—the delicate matter of her pay.

The curate, when she met him on the first Monday on which, in place of Mr. Breckinshaw called away to higher things, she set to with broom and duster, polishing rag and Brasso, she did not like so much. He was, naturally, a youngish man, but to her eye he was without that moderate belief in his own abilities that even a youngish man ought to have. And his unsureness took the form of making jokes.

"Ah, ha. It's—hum—Miss Craggs, isn't it? Ah, yes, Miss Craggs. And how does it go, hm? How does it go, the sweeping and the, ha hum, the rest?"

He did not wait for an answer.

Mrs. Craggs thought about correcting him over the matter of her marital status, but decided that he wouldn't remember if she did.

"Ha, yes, Miss Craggs. To each his appointed task, hm? You to

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wafting away the, hum, dust and collecting up the, ha hum, hassocks and me to hearing the occasional confession of the dreadful sins of our little parish, hey? The sad cases of, ha hum, simony. Yes, shall we say simony? Simony rife in the parish, Miss Craggs. Ho, hum, yes."

And off he swept the skirts of his cassock—for this was a particularly High Anglican parish in those days—swishing like an actor's cloak as he made his way up the chancel under the huge painting, by G. F. Watts, no less, of substantial angels praising the Almighty as they rest firmly on pale golden clouds. (These reminded Mrs. Craggs irresistibly of eclair pastry.)

With a sigh, Mrs. Craggs decided that for this week she would have to postpone taking a good feather-duster to the tops of the browny-red polished granite pillars, where half hidden amid vigorous stone foliage there lurked little stone pictures named as such scenes as "A Sower went forth . . . ," "He selleth all that he hath . . ." and "Cut it down . . ." The sweeping had been scandalously neglected by the volunteers and it would take all her time to put things right.

But when the Rector at the end of her morning's work thrust into her hand, in exchange for the key of the church, a small brown coin-clinking envelope—Mr. Breckinshaw must have told him how much to put in it, she thought—she took the opportunity of asking him just what simony was. It had worried her ever since the curate had used the word and she knew that the Rector would not mind explaining. He had already told her why it was that the church's patron saint had his rather curious name.

"I mean, sir," she had said at their first interview, "the Less. It's a funny old moniker, you can't deny."

The Rector's bland face had shown a momentary look of surprise at her question and his plump pink fingers had knotted themselves up almost inextricably. But not for long.

"Well, yes, Mrs. Craggs, but one must suppose that if the dear saint appears to be in a somewhat inferior position, then he is content with it. Content with his station. And that, of course, is not necessarily the lowest. Perhaps you don't know of all the other Saint Jameses. Let me see. Saint James Deacon. Saint James of Nisibus . . ." A clean, clean hand wandered to the close-packed ranks of books on the shelves behind him and plucked down a volume. "Yes, and there's the Saint James after whom one puts in brackets Tar-

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antaise, and Saint James Intercisus, and, of course, Saint James the Penitent. A goodly company. With our James in his place in it."

"Yes, I likes that, sir," Mrs. Craggs had said. "I really does. I mean, it's better, ain't it, than wanting ter be the Most, an' better, too, if you ask me, than going on and on about being the Least."

She had thought then for a moment that if she ended up as a saint—and she had no more idea of doing so than of ending up as Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster—then she'd settle very happily for being Saint Elma the Less.

"Now I wonder, dear lady," the Rector had said then, "would you consider it an impertinence if, when it comes round to our patronal festival again, I were to preach upon the subject you have so happily brought to my mind? On being content to be the Less. Yes. Yes, not without its relevance to our times, I venture to think. Not without its relevance."

So now, standing in the well proportioned cloister that linked the church itself to its four-square belfry tower, Mrs. Craggs did not hesitate to ask this other question.

"Excuse me, sir, but could you tell me something? What exactly's simony, sir?"

"Simony? Simony, my dear lady?"

The Rector's pink fingers locked, and after a moment unlocked.

"Well, simony, since you ask, is generally defined as—er—the buying and selling of ecclesiastical preferment. Something of that sort."

"Yes, sir."

Mrs. Craggs buttoned her faded cherry-red mackintosh across her flowered apron.

"And ecclesi-whatsit, sir?" she asked. "And preferment?"

"Ah, dear me, yes. What fearful jargon we find ourselves betrayed into using. Yes. Well, shall we say, 'to do with the church' and 'getting a better job.' Yes, I think that's about right."

"Thank you very much, sir. An' see yer Monday next, same time."

"Yes. Yes, thank you, Mrs. Craggs. Er—thank you."

But, little though the Rector knew it, simony was before long to raise its head in his quiet parish. And Mrs. Craggs, thanks to the clue of the forty-nine hassocks, was to be the one who would cause it so unexpectedly to rear up.

It was that next Monday, the second of the three during which Mrs. Craggs brought her unflagging elbows to the Church of St.

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James the Less, that the clue came to her attention. Before beginning to sweep, she had gone systematically along the pews picking up each used hassock from where the day before prayerful knees had implanted it and restoring it to its place, leaning up against the back of the pew in front. And as she picked up and straightened, she had counted. Eight, nine, ten . . . twenty-five, twenty-six . . . forty-seven, forty-eight, forty-nine.

"Forty-nine of 'em at it yesterday, then," she concluded, her cheerful whisper soon lost in the airy space underneath the gold-star-painted wooden roof. "That ain't so bad, not fer these days. Though yer might—"

She broke off abruptly as, with a swish and crack of cassock skirts that would have done credit to a racing yacht about to bag the America's Cup, the curate came in.

"*Ah*, Miss—Miss— Ho, hum, yes. Yes, Miss Craggs. Good morning to you. I see Mr. Breckinshaw's advowson is still working in your favor. Ho, hum, yes."

And, before Mrs. Craggs had had time to wish him good day in return, he had marched away up to the altar, bobbed down on one knee, made a sign of the cross that rather resembled the gesture of an over-excited traffic policeman, and plunged off to some mysterious task at the side altar.

Mrs. Craggs fetched her broom and began sweeping, doing her best to forget whatever silly word the curate had used to her so as not to have to bother the old Rector with more questions. Indeed, she succeeded in forgetting, too, so vigorously did she sweep, what had just come into her mind as she counted the forty-ninth hassock.

It was only when, coming out of the public bar at the Lord High Admiral, which stands conveniently next to the church, where she had disbursed a small part of the contents of the brown envelope the Rector had put into her hand, she happened to see Mr. Breckinshaw, very smart in a new-looking blue suit, about to go into the pub's saloon bar that the thought of the hassocks came back to her.

"Mr. Breckinshaw, Mr. Breckinshaw," she called out before she had had much time to think.

That gentleman turned at the sound of his name and inclined his head—he had a truly flourishing curvy moustache—towards Mrs. Craggs in token of recognition.

She went tramping up to him.

"Oh, Mr. Breckinshaw," she said. "Good job I saw yer. You know

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what I gone an' done? Left me good pair o' shoes in the back o' the church there, an' the Rector's got the key again now. I don't suppose you 'ave a set of yer own, do yer?"

Mr. Breckinshaw considered for a moment or two.

"Why, yes, Mrs. Craggs," he answered at last. "I do 'ave a key, as a matter of fact. My responsibilities entitle me. My growing responsibilities."

He extracted the key from a pocket of his new blue suit and handed it over.

"You will find me in the saloon bar," he said. "Please return it without fail. It's necessary to me, you know. Necessary."

"Without fail, Mr. Breckinshaw," Mrs. Craggs said.

And back she went into the locked and now deserted church. But there she wasted no time looking for a nonexistent pair of good shoes. Instead she poked round in the back recesses of the nave where items necessary to the performances of the services were kept, stacks of "Hymns Ancient and Modern," the processional cross, the choirboys' bright-red cassocks and snowy-white surplices.

She left deep in thought. But not so deep that she neglected to penetrate into the social upper reaches of the Lord High Admiral and there hand back to Mr. Breckinshaw his key—"Thank you, Mrs. Craggs, my duties, you know"—safe in the belief that he would fail to notice she was still wearing the same shoes.

Her state of particular thoughtfulness was renewed the following Monday, the last of the three on which she was to enjoy the solid workmanship and unassertive beauty of St. James the Less, when once again she collected up the used hassocks. Only forty-eight this time, but she reckoned a good enough tally for the holiday season.

And, once again, her thoughts were interrupted by the arrival of the curate, cassock flapping as if it led a hectic life of its own.

"Hah, Miss Craggs. Once more into the breach, eh? But not, I fear, in this parish into the—ho hum—breeches. Our good Rector does not subscribe very strongly to the Church's wish to give womanhood a greater share in its affairs. A certain democratization, yes, but only—ho hum—for us males."

Mrs. Craggs, leaving to fetch her broom from the rear of the building among the cassocks and surplices, the Hymns Ancient and Modern, and the dark-velvet collection bag, decided that the curate would not notice whether she had replied to all the words he had tumbled out or not.

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No more did she feel obliged to respond to the second instalment she received as he swished past her again on his way out.

"Yes, yes, Miss Craggs. Democracy the keynote nowadays. *La carrière ouverte aux talents*, you know. Ho hum, yes. And Mr. Breckinshaw to take tea this afternoon with the Rector, instead of it being the other way about as it has been more than once recently, for all his comparatively low station in life—ho hum, yes. And to be asked to become Rector's Warden, no less. Ho hum. In succession to Sir Hubert Palliser. Yes, *ouverte aux talents* indeed."

Mrs. Craggs' first reaction to all that was to think that she must be going barmy. She hadn't understood a word. But then she realized that she had understood something. One or two things at least.

She saw to it that she left the brass altar rail, the brass font pillars, the brass eagle reading-stand, and the brass christening ewer shining as they had not shone for years, and then, looking even more thoughtful than before, she went to hand back the church key to the Rector.

When he saw her, his mild white eyebrows rose involuntarily.

"Why, Mrs. Craggs, you look—dear me, you look, if I may say so, not unlike the Angel of Wrath. Is there anything the matter?"

"There is, sir," said Mrs. Craggs. "It's a case o' simony, I'm sorry ter 'ave ter tell yer. A nasty case o' simony."

"Oh dear, oh dear. Simony, you say, Mrs. Craggs? You're sure?"

"Pretty well, sir, pretty well. Otherwise I wouldn't 'ave spoke."

The Rector looked at her, blue eyes less twinkling now under snowy eyebrows.

"No, Mrs. Craggs, I rather think you wouldn't. So what exactly is it all about?"

"The 'assocks, sir. That's where it began."

"The hassocks, Mrs. Craggs? And—simony?"

"I reckon so, sir. Yer see, I don't suppose as you've got much of a 'ead fer figures, 'ave yer?"

"Why, no, Mrs. Craggs. One of my failings, alas."

"I thought so, sir, from the way yer couldn't say 'ow much I was ter 'ave fer me three hours of a Monday. An' that curate . . . Well, meaning no disrespec', but it's plain as plain 'e thinks as he's got more ter think about than five quid in the little money-bag what's passed round of a Sunday."

"Mrs. Craggs, I'm lost, I'm afraid. Quite lost."

"Well, who's ter blame you, sir. But some things is clear enough

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if yer looks in the right direction. An' one of 'em's that forty-nine 'assocks, call it fifty, an' five quid in total's no more'n two bob a 'ead. An' yer don't mean ter tell me, sir, that people like that Sir Hubert don't dish up more'n a couple of bob."

"Well, yes, Mrs. Craggs. I'm sure you're right. A good many of my parishioners are not without their share of the world's goods, and some almost certainly put a pound note into the bag each Sunday." A bewildered look of dawning understanding had appeared on his normally cheerful pink countenance.

"Mrs. Craggs," he said, "what's been happening?"

"That's what I come ter ask meself, sir. An' then, when I seen a certain sign, I decided I better 'ave a look at that old collection bag, sir. An' I did. An' it's a two-pocket job, sir."

"A two-pocket job?"

"Yes, sir. Someone's sewed a sort o' flap inside so that 'alf the money goes one way an' 'alf the other an' no one notices as they puts their ten bob or their quid in that there's a fair lot there already."

"Yes. Yes, Mrs. Craggs, I think I understand now." The Rector's clean, clean pink fingers mimed the necessary little maneuver. "Yes, I do understand. But who, Mrs. Craggs? Who?"

"Who took ter asking you ter tea, sir?" Mrs. Craggs replied. "Who are yer going ter 'ave back this very afternoon, wearing his new blue suit, an' ask ter be yer churchwarden an' 'ave his say as ter what goes on? Who goes ter the saloon bar in the Lord High Admiral, sir? I'm afraid it's like what it says on one o' them little stone pictures in the church, sir. The man what found a treasure hid in a field kept it ter 'imself like an' sold all that 'e hath ter buyeth the field."

"Why, yes, Mrs. Craggs, I'm afraid it is. The buying of ecclesiastical preferment. Yes, indeed. And I'm afraid, too, it will have to be a question of another of those pillar parables. 'Cut it down,' Mrs. Craggs, 'it cumbereth the ground.' "

"Cumbereth's right, sir. But it's a fair pity. It's gone an' spoilt old St. James the Less fer me, sir. Downright spoilt it."

"Q"

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a ***NEW*** short story by

URSULA CURTISS

In Twentieth Century Crime and Mystery Writers, *Jane S. Bakerman describes Ursula Curtiss as "adept at several patterns, each successfully wrought. Refusing to romanticize her characters, she produces works which are a satisfying blend of the expected and the surprising. Often, the surprise arises not only from a variation of a familiar pattern but also from startling and effective endings."*

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SOMETHING GREEN AND GROWING

by URSULA CURTISS

Although months would pass before she surprised its horrifying secret, Mrs. Lear did not care for the plant from the moment she laid eyes on it. And as a Mother's Day gift, of all things.

It was true that, random suggestions as to the altering of any status quo being a way of life with her, she had once remarked that it would be nice to have something green and growing around the house. Pinned down, she would have said something about a pretty hanging basket, but nobody pinned her down. As a result, it was like having made nostalgic reference to a baby and being presented with a truculent teenager.

The plant was very large and flourishing, firmly rooted in a black-

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vinyl container of suggestive size. Mrs. Lear had seen its ilk in banks and libraries and medical waiting rooms, which guaranteed it as unkillable. Its stem was formidable, its leathery oval leaves a deep green with lighter veining.

"There's a spray you can apply to make the leaves glossy," said Mrs. Lear's son-in-law Leslie, tenderer of this offering.

"But they're so pretty just as they are," observed Mrs. Lear narrowly.

Isabel cast a glance at her mother. "*I* think it's lovely. I don't know whether they like too much sun, so your west window ought to give it the right amount of filtering."

They all gazed at the plant, which now had the grimly determined air of a visitor with time to kill. Coupled with Isabel's earlier present of an ornamental birdbath, and even without the fast flicker of her violet eyes, the message was unmistakable: anyone with these delights to contemplate would happily spend more time in her own quarters.

The quarters were in fact generous: the master bedroom, turned over as a fait accompli by the Gillises in February, with its spacious bath and glass doors opening onto a patio that overlooked a swath of lawn. There were bookcases, and a small desk.

But there was now a hint of captivity, no matter how comfortable, and who knew what might follow—and eventually culminate in, "Isabel, you'll have to do something, your mother is wandering around again"?

In Mrs. Lear, as in most creatures, fear bred anger. "You did say it would grow quite tall, didn't you, Leslie?" she inquired, eyeing the fleshy presence in the pot. "Just over there, I think, beside the piano. That way, we can all enjoy it."

When her daughter had married three years earlier at the unexpected age of thirty-six, Mrs. Lear had gone through all the motions prescribed for widows with only children.

No, she wouldn't live with them, for all their urgings of ample space, and neither would she move to New Mexico. Both decisions, she assured them, were purely selfish—she was too old to give up her friends, particularly her golfing companions. As to the thousands of miles separating Connecticut from New Mexico, the mail and the telephone existed, and so did the airlines.

Upon which, so scalded by double rejection that for weeks strangers fidgeted uneasily when they became unseen targets of her

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fixed lavender-ice stare, Mrs. Lear returned alone to her uninteresting house outside Hartford. Leslie Gillis, at forty-nine, was roughly equidistant in age from her and her daughter, and for the first twenty-four hours of the mutual acquaintance formed in Puerto Vallarta, the Lears' annual vacation choice that year, an onlooker might easily have assumed that it was to the elder rather than the younger woman that Leslie was paying his handsome attentions.

It wasn't an outlandish notion. Mrs. Lear was a tallish, tailored woman with pretty eyes, short soft hair whose fawn and grey were sun-blended, features that had been angular in youth but were now aristocratic. By evening they were "Juliet" and "Leslie," while Isabel sat quietly by in the warm, half gilded dark near the swimming pool, the faintly scented air stirring her shoulder-length chestnut hair.

Was it the very tranquility which had drawn such a successful and elusive man—the suggestion that both women were sufficient unto themselves?

Mrs. Lear, who had been left with enough money to live reasonably well with a little management, certainly felt no physical attraction. Isabel, never beset by suitors, had a good many friends among both sexes and a highly paid personal-relations job, involving occasional travel, with a utility company. Neither of them fell upon Leslie Gillis as if he were the only drink of water in miles of desert.

And then suddenly they were together, and Mrs. Lear was alone. We shall see, she said to herself in the very small world which had been emptied of its only real interest. We shall see.

She did not telephone, for all her implied promises, although she talked cheerfully when Isabel did and always exchanged a few amiable words with Leslie as well. Her infrequent letters made reference to fictitious people and social involvements, and unfailingly mentioned something which engaged the future.

On the second Thanksgiving of their marriage, the Gillises flew east, providing Isabel with a thorough immersion in nostalgia.

"I had thought of asking a few people in," said Mrs. Lear, nodding at a ranked assortment of unopened bottles as if her manner had not long since driven away a never-large circle of possible guests, "but then I decided it would be so much nicer to have just us."

In January, having established herself as hale, independent, and thoroughly unpossessive, she judged the time to be ripe. Borrowing from a narrative overheard in a dress shop, she wrote her daughter that now that it was safely in the past she could describe "My Three

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Weeks on Crutches," and went on to detail her freakish accident on the stairs, the broken ankle and severely traumatized hip, the doctor's opinion that she had been lucky to get off so lightly.

There were no stairs in the Santa Fe house.

She tracked the letter in its flight, and on the earliest possible evening Isabel telephoned. She said, "Mother. Just listen uninterruptingly for a minute or two, will you? Leslie and I have been talking ever since your letter came this afternoon . . ."

It was as simple as a diagram of the foxtrot. Mrs. Lear gave in gracefully and by February was a permanent member of the Gillis menage in Santa Fe.

The adobe house was on two pinon-clad acres in the hills north of the city, so swept with billows of wind-blown light that for the first week or two dark glasses were a near-necessity. There were huge windows, three patios, a swimming pool. The rugs on the shining deep-red Spanish tile floors were what Isabel described incomprehensibly as Chimayo, mainly grey or mustard-yellow in background, but the big corner bedroom turned over to Mrs. Lear had been newly carpeted in pale-rose broadloom—"just in case," with a smile to take any worry out of it.

Fifty feet behind the house, standing by itself, was the one-room workshop where Leslie, now semi-retired from his investment counseling firm, busied himself with what he called his gadgets. It wasn't entirely a hobby—he had patented and sold a few, chiefly as modifications to small machinery. He had declined to show the workshop to Mrs. Lear on the general tour the day after her arrival: he kept it in a state of uproar and except to another compulsive tinkerer there was really nothing to see. "Besides which," said Isabel with feeling, "the air is full of metal filings or wood dust if Leslie's been near it in twenty-four hours."

Alone with Mrs. Lear, she said, "Don't be shocked, but that place is a godsend. Leslie sometimes spends a whole evening there. I don't know what too much togetherness would do, but I'm much too happy to risk finding out."

It couldn't be denied, even by the most raking scrutiny. Isabel's complexion had always been pale, enhancing the eyes and hair which were her best features, but here in her own house, without travel fatigue, she was positively pearly. Mrs. Lear found all men inscrutable unless they were roaring with laughter or black with rage, but it was clear that Leslie, too, had a single real focus in his life . . .

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Mrs. Lear did not at first feel shut out. Although she had no interest in languages not her own and declined Isabel's invitation to attend the small Spanish class that met one afternoon a week, they usually drove somewhere together in the morning. After lunch she took a nap and in the late afternoon joined Isabel in the kitchen to help with vegetable-peeling or sauce-making or whatever else had to be done ahead of time to leave the cocktail hour reasonably intact. It was very companionable—so much so that if Leslie arrived in the doorway it was like the successful approach of a prowler.

When there were people for cocktails, Mrs. Lear stayed, appraising clothes and jewelry and contributing to the edges of the conversation. When it was a matter of dinner to follow, she put forth at the outset the suggestion that she have a tray in her room.

"People would feel that they had to ask me back, and it creates an awkward situation."

Coaxed and wheedled as she had been, and confident that they wouldn't hear of this tiptoeing-relative ploy, she was sharply taken aback at Leslie's light parrying: "But all our friends know you're here, Juliet. We don't want to give the impression that you're chained to your bedstead for the evening."

"I think Mother should do whichever she finds more comfortable when the time comes," said Isabel, almost successful in covering the joking, jarring words. She smiled warmly at them both, as if introducing them to each other. "Heavens, anybody would think we were talking about ground rules for a summit meeting."

By her very defense, the damage was done—under Leslie's always amiable but noticing eye, Mrs. Lear had no option but to hew to her stated intention and exile herself to her room. She did not brood about it; her blood knew very well what might happen if she allowed it to surge free. Instead, she glanced across at the workshop, slantingly visible from her west window, and promised herself, *I will get in there.*

But memory, disciplined, went underground. On an afternoon with the kitchen light on at five o'clock because of a thunderstorm that circled and rumbled, Mrs. Lear was dicing apples for Waldorf salad when Isabel said, with the stiff air of one delivering a message put off as long as possible, "Could you— I know it sounds ridiculous, but could you try not to look startled whenever Leslie makes an appearance? He's quite fond of you, you know, but sometimes you give him the impression that you think he's—creeping up on you."

Mrs. Lear, caught in a pleasant slippage of time in which there

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were only the two of them, less mother and daughter than friendly peers, thought angrily, Then let him announce himself, and only realized that she had spoken aloud when Isabel, putting washed lettuce in a wire basket, turned her head in astonishment.

She was confused, but only for seconds. "I didn't write you at the time because I didn't want to alarm you," she said, bringing her knife down on an apple core and tossing the tough segments and pits to join the neat little cubes in the bowl, "but a man *did* walk into our house one day when I was still on crutches. He said he'd knocked, although I'm sure he hadn't. He was looking for the Crawfords down the street, but it can be very frightening when you're as good as helpless."

"It would be, of course," said Isabel with patent relief. Take that, Leslie, thought Mrs. Lear victoriously, and this time silently, but she began to treat him with a new caution, even smiling at him if their glances happened to meet during the quiet evenings—or at least drawing her lips back from her teeth.

And so Mother's Day arrived.

The dieffenbachia, identified as such by a visitor and watered and occasionally fed by Leslie (just as Isabel ministered to the birdbath), throve remorselessly. By mid-July it appeared jungly enough to produce coconuts or bananas, but all it put forth was a succession of new leaves, their pointed, needle-tight furl of pale green emerging at the top one at a time.

The fresh growth seemed to require a living sacrifice at the bottom. Left to herself, Mrs. Lear would have actively enjoyed the doomed and orange-blotched droop of what had been so tough and indomitable a few days earlier, but Leslie or Isabel or Mrs. Sedillo, who came twice a week to clean, always nipped it off early. The parting of leaves and what could only be called trunk was marked by a ladder of whitish striations that looked like handholds for baboons or worse.

The same visitor who had pronounced the plant to be dieffenbachia was also obliging enough to tell Mrs. Lear its other name as she was leaving: dumb cane.

"Dumb cane?" repeated Mrs. Lear civilly. "With a b?"

"That's right." The woman—tall, brisk, and knowledgeable—was something to do with the library board. "It's poisonous, or at any rate it can cause the tongue to swell enough to cause choking."

"Interesting," managed Mrs. Lear through a blur of shock and

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rage. She closed the front door and in a current of air the plant stirred its leaves mockingly. "Fortunately, it doesn't look tempting enough to eat."

She retreated to her room. Hands fisted at her sides, she paced the rose broadloom—seventy-eight, seventy-nine, eighty—only pausing dangerously once at the glass doors opening onto the patio. *Poison. Dumb cane.* Leslie's private joke, relished a little more every time he dissolved vivid blue plant-food in water to feed the monstrous thing.

Kill it? Mrs. Lear had brought her golf clubs from the east; she needn't even go too close.

Or confront Leslie?

Neither. He and Isabel were going out to dinner tomorrow night.

They left the house at a quarter of six, but Mrs. Lear waited for the last red coal of a sunset to burn itself out before, properly equipped, she set forth on the mission which had been delayed by a procession of obstacles.

The sky was thick with stars, and after a moment or two on the lawn outside her bedroom she didn't need the flashlight. Forty feet of grass and then a band of stony ground and pinons brought her to the door of Leslie's workshop. Here, although the end drawer in the kitchen held a neatly tagged key, she used a hammer to smash all the glass out of the pane above the lock. She was meticulous about it, in spite of her acute sense of time, like someone parched but deliberately letting the water run cold from the finally reached faucet.

Inside, the wall switch was where her gloved hand expected to find it. She snapped the light on and took one greedy and comprehensive look before turning it off and activating the flashlight instead and placing it on a wheeled stool.

It was a big room, about thirty by fifteen, floored in concrete. Against one wall were stacks and piles of material, glass and plastic as well as wood in various thicknesses. Another wall, covered in pegboard, might have been transplanted intact from an expensive hardware store.

There was a couch, a sink, a tilt-topped desk, a long workbench with various tools clamped to it, something that might have been a lathe, a chest of the kind found in dentists' offices with at least a dozen shallow drawers.

The workbench was bolted to the floor, but Mrs. Lear inflicted a

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good deal of damage on it with both ends of the claw hammer. She hurled the chest drawers with their thousands of small compartmented metal objects, hearing wood shatter on impact, and while the noise of the rolling and settling contents still echoed she seized a sharp-pointed tool from the pegboard and ruptured tubes of paint and epoxy and other compounds.

She found nothing remotely identifiable in the flipped-through pages of the drawing pad on the desk, unless possibly what was either an old-fashioned clothespin or a primitive doll. Although her soul longed for a fire, even a small one, she contented herself with shredding the paper. She stoppered the sink and turned both faucets on full, and then she retrieved the flashlight, left the glassless door standing wide, and returned to the house.

According to her watch, which she removed at once, the whole trip had taken eight minutes. Mrs. Lear changed swiftly into nightgown, housecoat, and slippers, and called the police. She gave her name and Leslie's and the address, and said tensely that there was a prowler outside, almost certainly in an outbuilding, and would they send someone at once as she was alone here? Yes, all the doors *were* locked, but hurry!

The Gillises were punctilious about letting her know where they could be reached, and Mrs. Lear dialed that number next. To Leslie she ended up, "They know there's someone in the house, because the light went out as soon as I pulled back a curtain—so please get here as fast as you can!"

The two cars arrived almost together, the police marginally first. By that time, Mrs. Lear had scrubbed her face to a soapy shine and armed herself with one of her golf clubs, letting steaming hot water run into the tub and out again as she did so. As she had known she must, she told her story twice, first to the horrified Isabel, who insisted on getting them both a brandy, and then to the police and Leslie when they came back from their inspection of the ravaged workshop.

Except for the central action, the routine she described was so true of the many evenings when the Gillises were out that Mrs. Lear felt thoroughly natural with it: the television program watched for a while after her dinner, the retreat to her part of the house for an early bath—about eight-fifteen, she thought. She couldn't really describe the sound or sounds that had alerted her, because she hadn't actively been listening, but something had made her pull back folds

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of curtain from the patio door and a moving light in the direction of the workshop had been extinguished at once.

The police, for whom troublesome mothers-in-law came equipped with broken bottles or blunter instruments, had already summed up her total pallor, her buffed nails in their natural polish, her snowily collared and cuffed navy housecoat. They made a dutiful note of the two youths who had come looking for yard work the week before, surprising Leslie in the act of filling a wheelbarrow with tumbleweeds that kept springing up among the gravel around the swimming pool, suggested a large dog or protective iron grillwork, and departed.

Mrs. Lear, whose tightly clutched forearms appeared to be containing a delayed reaction, was in fact hugging herself. Depression and loss were beginning to overtake Leslie visibly now that the immediate excitement had passed and there was no longer any male officialdom for whom to look vigorous and purposeful.

He suffered, she knew, from occasional insomnia. She rose from her chair, making a noticeable effort of it, and said in a mildly imploring tone they had never heard from her before, "Could you spare me one of your sleeping pills, Leslie? I really think—"

Thus brought to their senses, the Gillises apologized for having left her to face the night's unnerving incident alone. Isabel cosseted her into bed and brought her a glass of water from the bathroom, thereby being afforded a first-hand acquaintance with the still-wet tub, the lingeringly moist air, the damp towel slung from the rail.

Mrs. Lear even took the sleeping pill, although she felt as calm and luxuriously assuaged as if she had actually lain and been lapped about in warm water. Dumb cane . . . The slate perhaps not wiped clean, but the balance at least somewhat redressed.

The next day went askew from the start.

Instead of leaving for his customary three hours at his office, Leslie elected to start repairing the havoc in the workshop. At ten, Isabel's Spanish teacher called; an ulcerated tooth forced her to cancel the afternoon class. Isabel, greeted with this news on her return from the mailbox, thought for a moment and said in that case, as there was no marketing that couldn't wait until tomorrow, she might as well spend the whole day in and give Leslie a hand with the workshop, poor lamb.

At ten thirty, determined not to engage in any propitiatory mother-in-law work, Mrs. Lear settled herself in the living room

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with a magazine. At ten thirty-five, she discovered that she did not like being alone with the marshaled array of great oval leaves across and a little down the room from her.

She tried to analyze the situation while pretending to concentrate on a formal interior done in saffron and oyster. The plant, surely in Leslie's confidence from the beginning, had had ample time to receive intelligence from the grass on which Mrs. Lear had walked and the pinons against which she had brushed on her way to the workshop last night; Isabel had opened the windows early after their unusual locking. But for all the hostility which it was exuding like a malign fragrance, it could not suddenly start to lurch at her, hitching itself in laborious half rounds. The rugs would bunch up and stop it.

Here, become aware of something slightly amiss in her thinking and intending to examine it, Mrs. Lear stood up sharply instead, letting the magazine hit the floor with a cracking sound, and took refuge in her room.

At noon, Isabel came back to the house to slice cold chicken for sandwiches. Although there was no retrieving the designs Leslie had unearthed and meant to go to work on with fresh ideas, they were actually getting somewhere.

Mrs. Lear, who had had to avert her face to conceal a little spasm of pleasure, watched her spread mayonnaise. "Does Leslie ever think up toys? It seems such a large field." Like most of her utterances of late, this one had been formulated in the quiet of her room, and although she could no longer tack down the exact association she was quite sure that she wanted to know the answer.

"Toys?" Isabel sprinkled salt and pepper, closed and deftly halved the sandwiches, slid them into a plastic bag. "He might, I only get to hear about his ideas when they've reached a certain stage . . . I think I'll bring some wine and try to fool us into thinking it's a picnic."

Mrs. Lear attempted to take her customary nap but could not. It was as if some jeering enemy had managed to get in and disarrange all the furniture of her mind, so that when she started down some calming path as a prelude to sleep she bumped into something that had no right to be there. *Dolls*, she thought, and threw back her coverlet.

Perhaps another of Leslie's pills. Isabel had had the prescription refilled last week; he couldn't have reached the counting stage. Mrs.

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Lear put on a robe, opened her door, listened to the silence of the house, and proceeded very quietly to the Gillises' bedroom.

And she must have dropped off, if only for a few minutes, because at some point they had come in and put on their bathing suits. A side wing of one window stood wide, and although only a portion of curving concrete deck was visible Mrs. Lear could hear the faint slosh of disturbed water and, over it, Isabel saying, "—did discuss it very thoroughly before I called Mother, and we agreed that if she came it was to be for good. And now, just because this horrible business has cast a blight over everything—"

"It has nothing to do with the workshop." That was Leslie, temperate—and so, Mrs. Lear knew, with all the more staying power. "You don't realize it because it isn't directed at you, but your mother is getting extremely odd in the way she looks at me."

"Darling, you've been so angelic about all this that it's hard for you to see, but Mother's in a difficult position after all those years in her own house, wondering if she's really welcome. It takes time to—"

"It's been five months. And I'm not talking about any kind of fear, I'm talking about animosity. To put it mildly."

Mrs. Lear stood like something made of stone. After a few seconds of silence Isabel said, "Oh, really, Leslie. Why on earth? You must have some kind of theory if you're taking it all this seriously."

"All right, I think your mother was under a slight misapprehension down in Puerto Vallarta just at the beginning. I think—"

Mrs. Lear took an uncontrollable step forward as the live wire of her hatred of Leslie Gillis came hissing and sparking free of the tangle in which it usually hid. Her indrawn breath was not of recognition but savage scorn; she lost a few words in the *How dare he?* that went ricocheting around in her head.

"But even granted a grain of truth there—" oh, clever! nothing disarmed like the appearance of concession! "—that was three years ago, darling, and I have to break it to you that to Mother men are a necessary evil. She had one, it's as simple as that. So—"

Leslie was fully as artful as Isabel—his "Then I don't know" sounded so wrung that she became coaxing at once.

"I'll tell you what, darling. I'll call Marietta. I think dinner would be best, even if I don't promise to accept her verdict—after all, she hasn't practiced for years. In the meantime, I'll have a little talk

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with Mother and you have a little talk with yourself, hm? I'm chilly, are you? Let's move into the sun . . ."

Even if their voices had not begun to fade, Mrs. Lear could have borne no more. What had the air of a partial yielding was only one of Isabel's temporizings, clothing a basic refusal, but how long would she hold out against Leslie's displeasure, how long see her settled happiness in jeopardy?

Not long.

Not really an asylum, they would say to their friends, but simply a very nice place where there was a professional staff to cope with people who had developed eccentricities. They had some patients there with Alzheimer's Disease, too. The gardens were lovely.

Mrs. Lear ground her teeth. Never.

She got through the rest of the afternoon, even helping Isabel in the kitchen, and dinner, remembering to pull her lips back at Leslie, although her future seemed to have taken on a quickened tempo. The unknown Marietta was a psychiatrist, of course. There was certainly nothing wrong with Mrs. Lear, but everybody knew that surgeons cut, editors edited, and psychiatrists found something badly askew. Naughty Marietta, thought Mrs. Lear in an instant's merriment.

Lelsie went to bed early, pleading his labors in the workshop, although he had not been too tired after his coffee to wash the plant's hideous leaves. "It needs to breathe," he told Mrs. Lear for perhaps the tenth time, as if in the hope of her assuming this loving task, and she said ambiguously, "Does it?"

Isabel took a shower and returned in a thin drift of violet to read, as she often did when Leslie retired before ten. Tonight, however, she had a certain geared intensity which seemed to presage the "little talk." Mrs. Lear was by this time well prepared for it; she intended to be by turns astonished, hurt, and speculative. Was Isabel quite sure, she would ask, that this charge wasn't connected with Leslie's recently acquired habit of muttering to himself? Isabel hadn't heard him? Well, no doubt he made more effort when she was within earshot, but . . .

By its very nature, not talking to oneself would be difficult to prove. It would certainly muddy the issue.

The minutes went by and nothing happened except the arrival of a cool breeze through one of the open windows. At once the plant stirred tinily in its gratified, lamplit doze, and with the safeguarding presence of another person in the room Mrs. Lear, who of late had

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been unable to find a book that held her attention for more than two or three pages, lifted her head from the magazine abandoned that morning and stared at it boldly.

And closed her eyes in horror as her brain informed her as to what she saw, and opened them again to the same silently peeping atrocity.

He had frozen alertly, the tiny brown man who clung in the V between trunk and one of the arching stems, overlaid by a shorter curving horn, that fed the leaves. Everything about him said that he was a savage, no more than six or seven inches tall but so perfectly to scale that if his dreadful host were allowed to achieve its true proportions he would be life-sized.

Leslie brought him food, obviously, while appearing only to tend the plant. And instructions, which he was preparing to carry out tonight.

No, sooner than that. Now.

He rippled alertly when Mrs. Lear got "Isabel!" out of a convulsed throat. What, inquired an answering tautness in her chest, if he should come swarming down the trunk and make for her chair? But of course he did not; with the cunning of all his species he became as innocent as lamplight and chlorophyll.

Isabel didn't need a further summons. She got up at once and crossed the room, bending as compelled by the wild strength of the grip on her wrist. Mrs. Lear's broken whispering was scarcely more than a brushing against the spellbound silence. "Look, in the plant, in the middle, a third of the way up—he isn't a doll, he's a little man, he's alive, he's *alive*—"

"Yes, I see him," Isabel whispered back after moments. She had gone very white, but her control as she assisted her mother up and out of the chair was almost absolute. "See, there's your golf club." She turned Mrs. Lear gently toward the corner where the iron still stood, forgotten memento of the night before. "Can you hold that and keep watch while I call—"

"*Not Leslie!*"

"No, no, the—police. I think they should know about this. Keep the club behind your back, so as not to provoke him. Can you do that, Mother? I'll be right back."

Isabel did not pause at the near telephone extension just inside the dining room, but, out from under Mrs. Lear's eye, ran to the bedroom, snapped the light on ruthlessly, and shook Leslie

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awake—with some difficulty because in spite of his physical fatigue he had taken one of his sleeping capsules. "Leslie, *Leslie*, you've got to get up this instant! Oh, darling, you were so right about Mother. She's in the living room, obviously back in childhood, frantic about a favorite doll she calls her little man. She's convinced it's hidden in the plant, so you'll just have to keep promising to get it for her while I call Dr. Fellowes. This is way beyond Marietta—"

"Good God. Her little man," repeated Leslie, anchoring in his barely cleared head a phrase totally alien in connection with his mother-in-law, and made tidying gestures at his pajamas as he headed for the closet.

Isabel snatched up the receiver in a display of panic that sent him out the door. "There isn't *time* for a robe!"

Because how long could hallucination be counted on to last, even bolstered by her pretense that she had seen it, too? And the acute paranoia which was essential to this long-awaited moment?

That people crossed Mrs. Lear at their peril had been a fact of Isabel's life as far back as she could remember. That to an informed eye Mrs. Lear had shown signs of increased instability the Thanksgiving before last was more or less to be expected. The two circumstances had not come together for Isabel until she fell blazingly in love for the first time in her life, knew that a snatched meeting once a week under the guise of a Spanish class was not enough, and realized that nothing would induce Leslie to let her go. And realized, too, that a divorce action brought by her and fought every step of the way by Leslie would be costly as well as interminable.

Why should she wait all that time, and part with all that admittedly attractive money—Isabel was thirty-nine, and the man in question five years younger—when there was Mother of the implacable grudges, the powerful wrists conditioned by years of golf, the thought processes as burrowing as the work of moles?

But in spite of her determination and her months of tightrope-walking, her orchestration of Mrs. Lear's venom wherever possible—the oblique pointing out of the ugly plant to Leslie had certainly borne fruit—and her triumph and sense of imminence at last night's rampage in the workshop, Isabel was not without sensibility. Leslie had had time to reach the living room, perhaps even now—he would be speaking quietly—was promising to hand over the object of terror.

She had been contemplating the mirrored eyes it was impossible to imagine as one day being a bleached and stony lavender. Very delicately, she closed the bedroom door.

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beginning a *NEW* series by

JANE BOSWORTH

In the July issue, we brought you Jane Bosworth's third story about Em Grady, widow of Elmer Grady, rock-shop owner and desert rat. Jane Bosworth has not abandoned Em, but she has come up with a new set of adventures, about a New Zealand drifter named Keith Jenkins. We quote from her cover letter:

"In April [1983] I spent seventeen days motor-touring through New Zealand. While watching the sunrise over Auckland Harbor, a new character began talking to me. I began to see his slumbering country through his eyes, and I realized that New Zealand is just now edging into the questionable world of organized crime. I hope you enjoy 'Me Ellie's Willie' as told by Keith Jenkins."

We certainly did and believe you will, too. It is sharpened by the author's proven disposition for character, place, and pace . . .

ME ELLIE'S WILLIE

by JANE BOSWORTH

"Poor little Willie,
As dead as he can be.
Got tossed off the *Nellie G.*
Into the Tasman Sea."

Me inner voice kept poking fun at what ought to hurt, but didn't, bringing on a raging case of the guilts that got me to nosing around the back alleys of Auckland for the who and why of Willie's murder. I owed me Ellie that much.

A mate of meself in the Harbor Patrol slipped me photocopies of the *Nellie G.*'s papers. She carried frozen lamb from Invercargill to Japan, where she loaded up textiles destined for Auckland. Her crew

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was Kiwi, but her owner was Bolivian and her registry was Colombian. There ain't much money in lamb and textiles, yet every six months the *Nellie G.* was drydocked and overhauled. She was running in the red for an owner that didn't need a tax shelter.

Willie'd been doing piecework for a friend a meself that hired out crews of longshoremen on Marsden Wharf, where the *Nellie G.* always docked. I sought him out and found him parked on a stool in front of a fish an' chips joint at the bus terminal. He was stuffing his cheeks and eyeing the ladies' windblown skirts. Thompson's a muscled giant that spends his days working hard and his nights raising one too many pints with his crews. He grinned me a hello and offered up a greasy hand, which I accepted.

"Jenkins," he said and squeezed too hard. "I ain't seen you for a couple of months. You come down here looking for another a them runaways or is you gonna come back to doing a man's job on the docks?"

I give him the grimace that would break his hold and I shook out me hand.

"Me sister Ellie ain't heard from her son," I said. "Last I knew, Willie was working the docks on one a your crews."

I seen a look of apology settle on a face that had seen everything once too often. He started to speak and changed his mind.

"The truth ain't gonna pierce me hide," I said, "an' I'll find me a way to soften the blow for me Ellie."

"I've known you ever since you was a snot-nosed pickpocket, loving in with the Flower Children. But that don't make it any easier, Keith."

"Just tell it to me straight," I said.

"The lad's a junkie, Keith," he said. "Works long enough to buy a stash and then he disappears. I ain't seen him in two weeks. He's got a shack-in by the name a-Angie."

"Where do I find her?"

"Two of 'em live in a flat over Fisherman's Tavern. Damn it, Keith, I didn't want to be the one that set you straight 'bout the lad. I—"

I nodded and started walking toward Quay Street. I knew the lad was a junkie, but hearing it from a mate like Thompson somehow made the dirt of it rub off onto meself.

"Junkie." Me mind tasted the word. "Junkie. How? Why?"

We were alike, Willie and meself. Each of us stirrers, drifting in and out of work, moving on when the boredom hit. Meself, I got into longshoring the day after Thompson caught me picking his pocket.

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It was the first honest work I ever done, but I got bored with it and drifted on. I been a custom's officer, traffic cop—and a number of other things which I ain't so proud of. Willie an' meself is misfits; but misfits has changed from loving in to freaking out. It's a mutilating change.

Willie's flat was at the top of a flight of dirt-scarred stairs that leveled off into a finger-printed hallway. I knocked on the door and a drowsy female voice invited me in.

I let meself into a pigsty dominated by a dirty mattress that had a rumpled daughter of Frankenstein sprawled across it. Pink hair. Purple nails. Head down so's the dirt on the back of her neck showed. She was sizzling a roach between the tip of her cigarette and the floor.

She craned her neck to take in all of me, then she scooted back onto the mattress and assumed a Fifties pose that had all the sex appeal of a purple people eater. She took a deep pull on her cigarette and dragoned smoke out her nose. I caught the drift of sickeningly sweet cannabis. She pouted.

"The publican send you up for the rent?" she asked.

"I'm Willie's Uncle Keith," I said. "You know where he is?"

Anger flashed in her blood-flecked eyes and she bared her teeth.

"No!" She spit the word at meself. "An' you can bloody well tell 'im Angie don't care no more where 'e is. Tell 'im not to bother coming back for 'is clothes 'cause I sold 'em for rent money. After 'e didn't come 'ome, I rung up every bloody cobber 'e 'ad and they all said the same thing. 'Shift on, Angie. Willie ain't coming 'ome.' I thought we 'ad us something good going. Then 'e up an' walked out. Didn't even say goodbye."

She took another drag. Her pupils widened as she began gliding into airy-fairy land. I had to jerk her back before she bottomed out beyond me reach.

"Willie's dead." I kept me voice low and even.

Me words slapped her eyes open.

"Dead." She tasted the word. "Dead?"

"Murdered."

She hugged herself and stared at me.

"What can you tell me about the *Nellie G.*?" I asked.

"'E was working on 'er the day 'e—left. Willie said she was our ticket to 'eaven. Said 'e knew how El Patrone did it. Then 'e drifted to his mum an' this music box she 'ad. A tin box with a rhinestone

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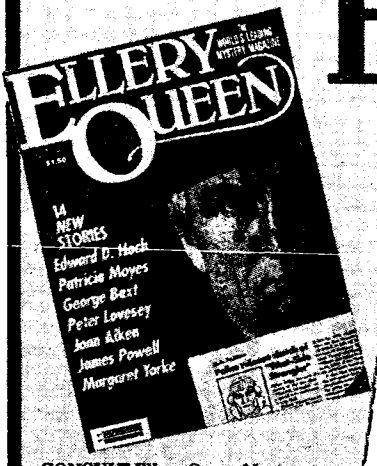

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lid. When I asked 'im who El Patrone was, 'e said 'e was a bloke 'at lived in Bolivia. I don't even know where Bolivia is, do you?"

Tears welled in her eyes. Her lips formed words I couldn't hear. She looked from her cigarette to me to the peeling paint on the walls. She laughed. It was loud, hysterical laughter that had to work its way out in order to be quelled.

She was like a child lost in a nightmare of unpredictable highs and agonizing lows. Looking at her made me ache to wring the necks of the fat vultures feasting upon her habit.

I left her alone and headed back to me office. Laughter ringing in me ears drove me to jog the three blocks to me office. I slammed the door behind meself and panted to a stop beside me desk. The *Nellie G.*'s papers were there, sitting beside an atlas open to Bolivia. The ship's owner lived in San Miguel, a small village near the heart of coca-land. "El Patrone," me dictionary told me, "is Spanish for the boss."

Poor, dumb Willie had been tripped up on Bolivia's green gold. I was zeroing in on the vulture's lair and needed a way to trap him.

I rung up a reporter I know that works for the *New Zealand News*, a paper affectionately called Kiwi Talk. He jumped at the opportunity to fill me in on El Patrone. Twenty minutes later, we were sharing a pitcher of Lions at the Shakespeare Tavern. He had a mug in his right hand and a fat manila envelope in his left. He set down the mug and wiped a Cheshire-cat grin onto his thin lips.

"You must be onto something big, Jenkins," he said, "and I want to be the first to hear about it."

"Page-twenty stuff, Nelson," I said. "Nothing that would interest you."

Nelson peered out at me through bifocals that made his eyes owl-like. He's a hawk-nosed little wisp of a man that earns his notes ferreting out scoops. Nelson never bothers with page-twenty stuff.

"Anything connected with El Patrone is page-one stuff." He could hardly contain his excitement. "He's a caviar and beans fatcat that just got deported rather than face a jail term on a trumped-up import-duty-evasion charge. We just did a page-one spread on the party he threw for the peons of San Miguel. The bugger flew in planeloads of American whiskey and French truffles. He barbecued five bulls and six pigs. Then he gave each woman in the village one of them Swiss sewing machines and a Japanese generator to power it with. Armies of the third world have been purchased for less than that."

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It didn't take me long to figure out why Willie'd got hisself killed. He was the termite in a billion-dollar building program. Squash him and you're home free.

"Who's El Patrone's connection here?" I asked.

"Right now, the Sinclair family. Word has it that they killed off everyone else connected with El Patrone. What got you into it?"

I told him about me nephew and he showed me the contents of that envelope. He had pictures of the Sinclairs and of El Patrone's family. Patrone's youngest son had a lightning-shaped scar knifing across his right cheek. He was registered in the downtown Travelodge as Juan Fernando Rodriguez. The last name rung a bell in me mind. The owner of the *Nellie G.* is Don Francisco Alfredo Rodriguez.

"Rodriguez and Louis Sinclair are dining together in the Fo'c'sle in—" he checked his watch "—twenty minutes," Nelson said.

I started to get up and he chuckled.

"The waiter's on the payroll," he said. "Tell him Nelson sent you."

I nodded me reply and escaped into the night. It'd been raining and that made an otherwise ugly city pretty. Night lights were reflected in the standing water and there weren't any trucks gearing down for that ear-busting grind that echoes and reechoes off too many buildings on too narrow a street. The day people had left and the city was all but asleep.

I strolled down empty streets past tourist shops hawking Maori carvings and sheepskins. I ended up inside the narrow lobby of the Travelodge. The girl behind the desk glanced in me direction as I strolled into the Fo'c'sle. It's a high-class seafood place where the waiter doubles as maitre d' and linened kitchen tables are set with silver and china. It has some of the best seafood in Auckland.

The waiter seated me in "Mr. Nelson's" booth. Me ears tuned into the conversation behind me. A man with a Spanish accent was finalizing a textiles deal with a gruff-sounding Kiwi. The Kiwi was purchasing crate number five two one.

"You have de mooney, no?" Spanish asked.

"In me pocket," Kiwi answered and thumped his chest.

When I heard the sound of someone thumbing a wad of notes, I dropped me napkin and leaned into the aisle for a look-see. I caught a glimpse of the scar-faced son of El Patrone stuffing a wad of notes into the inside pocket on his sports jacket. I picked up me napkin and sat back up in me seat.

"Señor," Spanish said. "You have nothing to worry about. If you

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are not satisfied with ze goods, you get your money back. This I promise you."

I'd heard and seen enough. I signaled me waiter and asked him which room was on the chit next door.

"Number three one eight," he whispered. "Third floor right."

I thanked him for Nelson, left, and caught the elevator to the third floor. There's a bench and an ashtray to the left of the elevator. I sat down and wished I smoked. It'd give me something to do while I waited.

The elevator kept coming up to two and going back down again. Two, I remembered, is where the bar is. Then it finally hit three. I had just enough time to get to me feet before the door opened.

Scarface stepped out. I fell into him, pushing him backward against the closed doors and then righting him.

"Zo zorry, matey—" I slurred me words. "I been boozing with me jokers. Guess I 'ad one too many."

The doors opened and I stumbled in beside a disgruntled grandmother, who wasted no time telling me how awful her tour was.

"*Sprechen Sie Deutsch?*" I asked her.

She didn't. The elevator delivered us both to the lobby and I wasted no time getting meself back outside into the night.

Me first stop was the Shakespeare Tavern. Nelson was just where I'd left him. I plopped meself down in front of him.

"You got a plant on the Travelodge desk?" I asked him.

"Sure. Day and night."

"Good. You call me at me office if our boy gets hisself any calls. Okay?"

"Okay."

"How long does it take to get money transferred in from overseas?" I asked him.

"How much money?"

I fingered the wad in me pants pocket. Two inches thick. All C-notes.

"A hundred thousand," I guessed.

"Forty-eight hours if it's coming from an accepted currency country like America, Britain, France, Germany, or Japan. Up to two weeks if it's a third-world country. It takes that long to buy that much accepted currency. Why?"

"I got me an idea on how to wring a vulture's neck," I said. "Maybe it'll be page-one stuff."

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I left him to ponder what I meant by that and went looking for Thompson. I found him raising mugs with a fellow longshoreman in a sawdust-and-peanut-shell-floor place called Wharfy's Inn. I caught his eye and head-motioned for him to meet me outside. Didn't take him long to elbow his way through the crowd and meet me. I peeled six bills off me wad and stuffed them in his fist. His eyes followed me wad back into me pocket.

"Six more," I said, "if you sidetrack a crate of goods off the *Nellie G.* Crate's number is five two one."

"Hell, Jenkins, old mates don't got to buy favors. You coulda just asked me."

I slapped me arm around his shoulder. Had to stand on me tiptoes to do that.

"It's dangerous, Thompson," I said. "You might need some of it to buy blindness. I ain't risking nobody's life for nothing."

"Ship docks at 0500," he said. "Where do you want the crate?"

"In the pumphouse in the salt baths. Think you can get it that far?"

"Piece a cake, Keith. Piece a cake. If you need anything else, let me know."

I promised I would and left. I walked down to Customs Street to this run-down hostel overlooking Marsden Wharf. Got meself a single room overlooking the wharf. I parked in a chair beside the open window and waited for the sunrise. The *Nellie G.* docked at 0530.

Thirty minutes later, I seen the sun pinking up the clouds across the harbor. It weren't long before I seen Thompson's pickup pull up to the dock and unload a crew of wharfies. A crate off the *Nellie G.* got itself loaded and tarped in the back of Thompson's truck. I watched it turn right toward the baths, then I headed down the back stairs and out the door.

Got me a sweet and a cuppa tea, which I took up to me office. I rung up Nelson and asked him if Scarface had any calls. He hadn't gotten any, but he'd made one about ten minutes after I brushed him in the hallway. The girl at the desk didn't know any Spanish, so she couldn't say what was said—just that it was shouted. I hung up, ate me sweet, and rung up me Ellie. I invited meself to spend a few days with her as soon as I wrapped up things here. I didn't tell her about Willie.

After I hung up, me mind drifted to that tin music box me Ellie treasured so much. It'd taken me six months a saving me allowance

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to be able to buy it for her. Funny—it seems so gaudy now. Rhinestone on tin. A little girl's dream. A woman's fond remembrance. Me gift to a sister that doctored me hurts and stood between meself and an overbearing father that thought I ought to be a doctor. I was a customs official when he died.

Thompson rang me up about eleven to tell me the job was done and a bloke named Sinclair was madder than hops about the missing crate. I told him there'd be a bonus in it and hung up in the middle of his protest. The phone jangled again. It was Nelson.

"Spanish is meeting Louis Sinclair at the Inferno at five. Why Hell's Gate, Jenkins?"

Hell's Gate. When I was a little nipper, me dad took me there. It was a steaming, hissing place where an angry earth destroyed life. I remember peering into a gunmetal pool of boiling liquid known as the Inferno. The graphite in that pool varies from 100 to 115 degrees Celsius. The heat and steam and sulphur stink made me head swim and me dad carried me to a tourist shelter, where I had to sit on a bench until me head cleared.

"They got themselves a sign near the edge of the Inferno," I said. "It says that anyone throwing rocks or litter into the pools may be asked to retrieve them."

The other end of the phone went dead.

"Nelson?" I asked. "You still there?"

"This is your doings, Jenkins," he said. "I've got no part in it. You understand that? No part."

The bloody hypocrite. More than once, I'd set him up with a page-one scoop. More than once, he'd washed his hands of any responsibility for newsmaking. He had the connections to do the favors I needed. Scooping out was his payment.

"I tipped the waiter for you, Jenkins," he said. "And it's me notes that shifts information your way. You owe me."

"I'll send you a set a pictures," I said and hung up.

I grabbed me camera and headed out the door and down the stairs to the garage. Me car's pegged over twice on her mileage, but I keep her engine in tip-top shape. She turned a four-hour drive into three and delivered me to the portal entrance to Hell's Gate Thermal Reserve at four forty-five. One of them tour buses was parked near the entrance and a uniformed driver was herding tourists out of the reserve toward the bus. I melted into the crowd and entered the reserve without checking in at the office.

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Steam was blowing off the hissing earth toward the office. It made the path hard to follow. I made me way past boiling water pools, steaming cracks, and a sulphur bath that belched its stink into the air. I paused at the Inferno long enough to see the boiling graphite churning up from within the pit, then I headed up the path to the three-sided tourist shelter. It was angled in such a way as to make detection of a seated person impossible.

I settled meself on the bench, checked me F-stop on me camera, and aimed it at the ledge overlooking the Inferno. The wind blew the steam away from me, forming a background of thick white fog for me pictures. This is a primordial, angry earth, I thought. Her hissing voice drowns out everything else.

The shadowy forms of men were emerging from the fog, stepping out into the afternoon light. Louis Sinclair and El Patrone's scar-faced son were walking toward the Inferno. They were in a heated and animated conversation lost to the hissing earth. Neither man seemed aware of the two men following in their wake. They stopped on the ledge overlooking the Inferno. Sinclair pointed to something in the pit and Scarface peered into the pool. Then one of the two men that was following grabbed Scarface and pinned his arms behind his back. The other man loosened a diver's weight belt from his own waist and fastened it around Scarface. Scarface planted both feet, threw back his head, and opened his mouth. The men shoved him into the pit, then all three men turned and walked back down the path into the steam. It was almost a perfect murder. The flesh would cook off the bones and dissolve in the boiling graphite. The bones would sink. An angry earth squelched his screams. Me camera had recorded it all.

Nelson made three sets of me pictures. One for hisself. Two for meself. I mailed me extra set to El Patrone.

Ten days after I posted El Patrone's pictures, Sinclair's youngest son was gunned down in a parking lot. Two days later a young latino was found floating face-down in Auckland Harbor. Then six more murders happened. Nelson was in pig-heaven writing about an underworld war in Auckland. Then the *Nellie G.* docked at Marsden Wharf. The murders stopped.

Two hours before she was to sail to Invercargill, I had me mate in the Harbor Patrol get hold of the captain and tell him about the whereabouts of his missing crate. It was Thompson that got hired out to load the crate on the *Nellie G.* Four hours, ten minutes, and

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fifteen seconds after she sailed, the *Nellie G.* exploded and sank. Nelson just happened to be flying over Colville Channel when she blew. Since he never went anywhere without his camera, he had the only pictures of her unfortunate accident. It was meself that tipped him about the bomb she carried. Her sinking made me even with everyone. The war was over. It was time to visit me Ellie.

I caught a flight to Queenstown, where I took the *Earnslaw* across Lake Wakatipu to the sheep station me Ellie and her Johnney run. It's a lonely place, with enough hectares for sixty thousand head of sheep to get themselves lost on. Me Ellie's gingerbread Victorian mansion overlooks the deep-blue waters of the lake. She was waiting for me when we docked. It's habit, I guess, but me Ellie and me never say nothing until she steers me inside her parlor. Her knick-knacks are in that room, shelved on the wall behind her parlor grand piano. The music box I give her so long ago sits at eye level on a shelf of valuable porcelains.

I took it off the shelf and opened its lid. Inside it were some neatly folded papers. Willie had left a testimonial of sorts, telling how El Patrone flew into Auckland on his private 747 once a month. Just northeast of Great Barrier Island, where the plane began its final descent into Auckland, it dumped a cargo of sealed plastic bags into the ocean where the *Nellie G.* retrieved them. Cocaine from Bolivia was smuggled into Auckland and sold to the underworld kings for distribution. He had an invoice for a certain crate of textiles purchased by Louis Sinclair.

"Evidence," he called it.

Not enough to bring a case before the magistrate. Just enough to panic the big boys into killing off a would-be blackmailer.

I handed the papers to me Ellie and let her read them.

"Willie was working as an undercover agent for the government," I lied. "He was caught, murdered, and tossed into the Tasman Sea. I'm afraid his body will never be found."

Tears welled in me Ellie's eyes and I hugged her to meself.

"Willie's death led to an investigation that busted up the drug trade in New Zealand," I told her. "He didn't die for nothing. The lad's a hero."

When Johnney come in from shearing, it was me Ellie that told him of Willie's death. Her voice was steady and I seen a glint of pride in her eyes. Johnney wrapped his meaty arms around her, pulled her close, and wept in her hair. Willie'd been the rift in their marriage that had kept their emotions too controlled for closeness.

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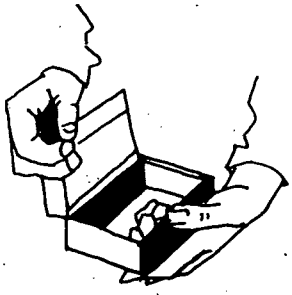
I knew that sharing their grief would begin the long slow process of spanning that rift.

I stayed long enough to be sure me Ellie'd be all right, then I said me goodbyes. From the bow of the *Earnslaw,* I watched Johnney sling an arm around me Ellie and pull her close.

Willie may have wasted his life, I thought, but he didn't die for nothing. Somehow, his death had made the world a better place to live. Willie'd helped me wring the vultures' necks.



DETECTIVERSE

CAUGHT—AND SHOT

by DORIS R. GOLDBERG

Here lies my troublesome, stubborn wife Dot—
There's only one reason why she's in this spot.
Refusing to follow my rules of the game,
She clearly has none but her own self to blame.

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Phase Three had been easier than Phase Two and far easier than Phase One . . .

PHASE FOUR

by JAMES GRANT HOLDING

"Know All Men by These Presents." The words blazed out in large English typeface across the top of Miranda's Phase Three. Phase Three was a banking form called a "Discharge of Mortgage." It had been easier than working the computer in Phase Two and far easier than stealing the loan file in Phase One. Only Phase Four remained.

Miranda was robbing her own bank. Moreover, she was robbing it of her own mortgage loan. It was really, she thought, quite an appropriate cap to a twenty-five-year career as an escrow clerk.

After twenty-five years of escrow, school taxes, property taxes, fire, life, and accident insurance, and all the headaches that went with them, she'd decided the bank owed her the amount of the loan and more. So she'd set about stealing it. It wasn't a large amount in terms of what the bank had, but, to her, getting out from under the loan meant freedom and the chance to build a nest egg for her retirement, something the bank's niggardly pension plan certainly wasn't going to do.

It had been almost ridiculously easy. She'd plotted out the four phases; none of them presented a problem as long as her nerves held. So far, they had, and the worst was now behind her.

In Phase One, she'd stolen the actual loan file. She had smiled at that smarmy new management trainee at his platform desk outside the vault as she passed. (With all her service, she still had to use a half-desk unit behind the teller counter in plain sight of all the customers.) Inside the vault, she'd simply pulled her loan file from the filing cabinet along with a half dozen others that needed work. No one ever questioned an escrow clerk taking loan files. She returned the other six, but hers went home with her that night, hidden in her knitting bag. It had burned beautifully in the small fireplace

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in the living room of her soon-to-be-free-and-clear home. She'd smiled dreamily as the mortgage, bond, title search, abstract, four years of tax and payment records, and hated escrow turned to ash and fled up the chimney.

Phase Two was harder. Miranda was not a computer person. If it hadn't been for that nice Shirley from EDP and the computer training Miranda had coaxed her into giving, the whole caper would have been impossible. (Miranda liked to think of it as a caper. It made her feel wicked.) What eventually happened was curious, complex, and almost certainly guaranteed to be untraceable. All record of Miranda's loan vanished. To satisfy the mechanical bookkeeper, the amount of her loan reappeared in odd sums of between ten and thirty dollars in almost every loan balance the bank held. Naturally—and, she thought, fittingly—the explanation was "miscellaneous escrow charges."

And now she'd completed Phase Three. Having eradicated the physical and electronic evidence of her mortgage, she had to get rid of the legal records. Like all mortgages, her loan had been recorded at the county courthouse on the other side of town. She had needed only the Assistant Manager's signature and a notarization on the Discharge of Mortgage form.

She had put it in a stack of eight other forms, those of people legitimately paying off their mortgages, and had carried the stack to the Assistant Manager's office. She had been pleased and proud that her hands didn't shake at all.

The Assistant Manager had been a piece of cake. A blond, blow-dry young man with many affectations yet few talents in the financial area, he signed the forms without reading them.

She walked her stack of Mortgage Discharges through the rest of their process. She personally affixed the company seal to them and took them to the blowsy hussy of a receptionist to be notarized. There, again, she smiled to see that the forms went totally unread.

She was waiting with her papers when Bob, the retired Office Manager, arrived. Bob came by twice a week out of habit to run small errands—among them, satisfying mortgages like these at the courthouse. Almost giddy, Miranda shared a cup of coffee with him and reminisced about the old days before seeing him on his way.

Except for Phase Four, she was home free. And Phase Four was the easiest of the lot. It consisted solely of a three-by-five salmon-colored index card that rested in a file box not six feet from her desk. It detailed her mortgage, listing type, location, amount, and, of

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course, borrower's name. It was the last existing evidence that she'd ever had a loan. And it would be flushed away in tiny pieces in the ladies' lounge not five minutes after she got back to her desk.

Satisfied, happy, smiling, Miranda returned to her work area. As she entered the bank lobby, she saw the group of people clustered around her desk. Terror clawed at her suddenly. How, she wondered. How could they have known? And so quickly. She'd done it all so right. Her pulse hammered at her temples. Her ears roared. Like an automaton, she approached the group, wondering if her legs would give out.

Then Miranda saw their faces. They were smiling at her. It puzzled her. As a discovered embezzler, smiles were the last thing she expected.

She began to pick out the faces. None of them belonged to Security. There was young Haber, the polite boy from Marketing, and Marge Wilson, the woman who had the affairs, from Public Relations. There was her boss's boss, Jack Leary, the head of lending operations—and, oh heaven, there was Mr. Cassidy, the president himself. He was coming toward her, his hand outstretched and his face wreathed in the Irish grin that always made Miranda's heart flutter.

The others followed in his wake. Some she didn't know carried cameras and notepads.

As Mr. Cassidy took her hand, flashbulbs went off and some of the younger personnel clapped their hands and cheered. Cassidy enfolded Miranda's hand in both of his and widened his grin. From somewhere someone gave her a bunch of roses. Miranda took them absently and cradled them in her free arm.

She smiled tentatively and realized that Mr. Cassidy was speaking to her.

"At first I thought this contest was just the usual marketing hogwash, but when I found out who had won, I realized what a great idea it was. Congratulations, Miranda!"

Contest? Miranda wracked her brain. She'd concentrated most of her time lately on her caper and her normal work. Had there been something about a contest?

Cassidy straightened and his face became benignly grave. "Miranda, it is my very great pleasure to give you an award you have deserved for a long, long time. I hereby formally declare you our Employee of the Year." His grin began to reappear. "As such, Miranda, you will be entitled to—"

Half stunned, Miranda barely heard him go on. Employee of the

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Year! It was hard not to giggle. What a perfect note on which to end her caper. She tried to focus on what Cassidy was saying.

"There will be a formal dinner with myself and, regrettably, the other members of the board. You'll enjoy two football and two baseball games as our guest at the bank's special glass booth at the stadium. You'll be featured all year in our advertising campaign—that will involve some first-class travel I'm sure you'll enjoy. And, finally, the bank will totally forgive any outstanding loans you may have on the books."

Miranda felt the blood drain from her face.

"I beg your pardon, Mr. Cassidy?" she whispered.

Cassidy beamed. "I know, Miranda. It's a lot to take in at once. Quite simply, the bank will forgive your debts outstanding—we'll pay off all your loans. Whatever you have—an auto loan, a personal loan, a mortgage, anything at all—it will be gone as soon as we make the entries and get the bookkeeping done. Miranda, you're debt-free!"

Miranda couldn't help herself. She shot a glance at the card file that held Phase Four. Cassidy followed her eyes. He laughed. "Right! Let's do it now. One of you, pull Miranda's loan card for us."

Mary Miller from Public Relations snapped a picture of Miranda and Cassidy just minutes later. She felt the snapshot captured the essence of both the moment and the event. It showed Cassidy presenting Miranda with the card detailing her mortgage loan. The Employee of the Year was so overcome with emotion, she had burst into tears.

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a *NEW* Sergeant Bullock story by

JAMES POWELL

Patch wiped his mouth on his sleeve. "Hurrah for pirating, Bob Jones!" he cried. "Go to bed and get up whenever you please! Leave your vegetables on the plate or see how long you can go without a bath whenever you please! Wear a plaid tie with a striped shirt whenever you please! Aye, once you've tasted cutlass steel between your teeth, you'll never walk ashore again . . . !"

One of James Powell's most delightful Maynard Bullock adventures. As delightful, we think, as "The Scarlet Totem" in the April 1983 issue, cited by Marvin Lachman in The Mystery Fancier *as EQMM's best and most enjoyable story of the year . . .*

UNDER THE SPANGLED ROGER

by JAMES POWELL

The large famous eye behind the magnifying glass grew larger still. "Nine hundred and ninety-seven," counted the Prime Minister of Canada. "Nine hundred and ninety-eight. Nine hundred and ninety-nine." Looking as tired as the rose in his lapel, he set the aerial photographs of the upper reaches of the Saint Lawrence River down on his desk and stared out the window to where a steady cold rain was falling. Yes, the report had been correct. One of the Thousand Islands was missing.

Funny how things come back to haunt you. A few years before, at a world heads of state banquet, the Prime Minister had found himself seated behind a pillar for the umpteenth time. Weary of craning his neck to catch the toasts at the far end of the table, he toyed with ways to get Canada more international clout. That's when he got the Disintegrator Ray idea. Invent one of those babies and

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watch the world sit up and take notice! Then the States would keep its acid rain at home. Then the Soviet fishing fleets would steer clear of Canadian waters.

Back in Ottawa, he'd handed the idea to a minister without portfolio who had every power tool from the word go in his garage workshop. The frequent electrical blackouts in the man's neighborhood in the following months encouraged the Prime Minister to believe the details were being worked out. But clearly the Americans had gotten there first. And of course they weren't going to try out the Disintegrator Ray on one of their own islands. So goodbye, Ghost Island. Count on some pesky questions about that in the House. But what could he say? If the Americans knew he was onto them, they'd rush into production and start throwing their weight around. He needed more time to come up with an Anti-Disintegrator-Ray Ray or something.

Brooding over this dilemma, the Prime Minister rubbed his right hand, which sometimes pained him in damp weather. A certain Mountie had slammed a limousine door on it, the dumb clod. Suddenly a sly glint leaped to his eye. Yes, that way he could truthfully say the Mounties had the matter of the vanished island under investigation. And suppose by some miracle the investigator in question stumbled on the answer? Why then the Americans would probably disintegrate him. Well, the Prime Minister could live with that. Yes, indeedy.

But as he reached for the phone, his glee died. The portraits of his predecessors in office hanging in elaborate ormolu frames on the study walls met his eyes with a united gaze that said they found him low and paltry.

At the foot of Stone Street in downtown Gananoque, Ontario ("Gateway to the Thousand Islands"), stands an abandoned wharf. The town fathers have set up a skull-and-crossbones warning that it is used at one's own risk. Below, on the same standard, a smaller sign with a smaller skull-and-crossbones announces *Death's Head Island Lodge Boat Service.*

A large, stocky, red-faced man with a trim mustache and a suitcase strode out onto the wharf. He was dressed in his "mufti duds," as he scornfully called his civvies. For today he was not Acting Sergeant Maynard Bullock of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police. Today he was Bob Jones, a big butter-and-egg man from Schenectady, New York. He felt his tie—a loud, stripey affair, a Christmas present

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from that formidable in-law, Mother Fothergill—lent him a real American air.

Not that his uniform was far. He'd dropped it off at the Gananoque Valet Service. After all, as Superintendent MacNaughton assured him, when he'd solved the mystery of the disappearance of Ghost Island he would surely become a legend in his own time. And that meant reporters. And the press didn't think it was getting its money's worth if you weren't wearing your uniform.

At the end of the wharf, an open black launch heaved gently in the swell. But a gaunt, long-jawed apparition from another age barred Bullock's way on board, an ancient pirate with a pouting scar that ran from below one eye to the black patch on the other. He wore earrings, a wicked hook for a right hand, a wooden peg for a left leg, and a basket-handled cutlass in his belt. Bullock dropped his suitcase and would have stepped back to get some fighting room, but the man's hook found his lapel buttonhole and pulled him up and forward until he stood on tiptoe and nose-to-nose with his captor.

Muttering dark curses, the pirate probed Bullock's face with that one terrible bulging eye as though he thought he knew him from somewhere. Then he shoved a passenger roster in Bullock's face. "Be your mark there or do I gut you like a pilchard?"

"Bob Jones, that be me," blurted Bullock, pointing out his name. Funny how his childhood adventure books, which catalogued the terrors of these freebooters of the sea, had never once mentioned the horror of pirate breath. Set free, Bullock reached for his suitcase, but the cutlass slashed the air above his knuckles.

"Belay that," growled the pirate. Then he shouted, "Mr. Moon, do a guest of Death's Head Island Lodge hoist his own duffle?"

A bald sailor with a round, earless head and a crutch hobbled from the boat to grab up the suitcase. "No, sir, Captain Patch, he don't!"

Bullock joined the other passenger in the stern, a portly type in rumpled tweeds and horn-rims. "Bob Jones," he announced. "Butter and eggs."

"Cleveland Bagshot," the man replied affably. "I teach geology at SIT."

Here Captain Patch's salty oaths began to roar down on the ancient crew. In no time, the launch was churning out into the channel, the Canadian flag crackling smartly in the stern. Motor boats darted in and out of the mouth of the Gananoque River. Beyond them plodded four-square houseboats. Out farther still, bright sailboats leaned in the wind. Soon the launch entered an armada of islands,

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some large enough to hold entire villages, some a cottage or two. Others were no more than a rock and a tree. Overhead, the blue sky held hundreds of small white clouds like a mirror of the river itself.

After a bit of rubbernecking, Bullock asked his traveling companion, "SIT?"

"Schenectady Institute of Technology," answered Bagshot. "Where do you hang your hat, Mr. Jones?"

Bullock winced inwardly. Blast! Talk about bad luck. Well, it was too late to change his story now. Out loud he said, "Hey, it's a small world. I'm from Schenectady, too."

Bagshot shifted in his seat as if it had grown uncomfortable. "Nice little town," he said.

"You can say that again," ventured Bullock. He was relieved to see Bagshot's nod. By godfrey, that was a close one, but he'd carried it off.

Just then, from a small loudspeaker over their heads, a recorded voice said, "Ladies and gentlemen, welcome aboard the *Pirate Queen*. During our brief trip to the lodge, allow me to sketch in a bit of the history which we are dedicated to preserving. First, let us cast our imaginations back to another time when all of this was a wilderness of islands thinly populated by civilization's outcasts, men and women each seeking to become an island unto his or her self, an island cut off from the main.

"But then came the fateful day when Canada and the United States tried to assert hegemony over the islands so that taxes could be collected and the proper flags flown on the proper national days. When the Thousand Islanders resisted, they were declared outlaws. And outlaws they became, pitiless river pirates who raided St. Lawrence shipping and shore settlements. Soon they were a pirate fleet with an elected leader, more president than king. And so a dream was born of an archipelago republic, a corsair commonwealth that could tax ships instead of plundering them and kill legally for country and flag. —And that flag would be the Spangled Roger, the grinning skull-and-crossbones of the pirate ensign studded with a star for every island in their republic.

"Under that flag they killed, died, and, as many cities were to learn, avenged their dead. Until the middle of this century, for example, the city of Toronto kept Sunday as a day of municipal mourning made joyless by law with mandatory hush and curfew to commemorate the bloody pirate raid of 1887. And a legend survives

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that Theodore Roosevelt was so mortified by leaving office without extirpating the river pirates that his ghost still stalks these islands, big stick and all.

"During the First World War, the Thousand Islanders threw in their lot with the Central Powers, resupplying the German submarines which roamed the St. Lawrence, dreaming that, with the Kaiser in the White House and England a German colony, independence would be theirs. At the war's end, the returning armies undertook a systematic destruction of the Thousand Islanders. Cutlasses and cannon could not withstand machine guns and mustard gas.

"Death's Head Island Lodge, a faithful reconstruction of the final pirate stronghold, attempts to recapture those years when corsairs ruled these islands. Come and visit the Fresh Water Pirates' Hall of Fame, with its exciting waxwork display, Scrimshaw City, bringing together the world's largest collection of etched bone-and-ivory artwork suitable for family viewing, and the Thousand Islander Museum, with its hourly slide-show and diorama. And nightly there is a reenactment of the pirates' burning of the Parliament Buildings in Ottawa in 1916, all brought to you by the magic of sound and light alone." After a pause, the voice began again, "Mesdames et Messieurs . . ."

Bullock neither spoke nor understood his country's other official language, but he always cocked his head attentively when it was being used in announcements. However, today he was Bob Jones. So when Bagshot asked if he had any ideas on what made Ghost Island vanish, he turned and said, "You tell me. You're the geologist."

"Most geological thinking's gone into where islands come from," admitted Bagshot. "Today that means the jigsaw theory. Say the continents are a giant jigsaw puzzle left unfinished by some higher being. That makes your islands the pieces that haven't been fitted in place and your seas and lakes the places where they go. That still leaves me scratching my noggin over Ghost Island." He pulled a heavy, three-pronged hook from a paper bag. "I went into town today to buy this. It's state of the grappling-hook art. Patented not to pick up old rubber boots. Later I'll give dragging the bottom a try."

Bagshot delved into the finer points of the grappling hook until the recorded voice switched back to English and said, "Ladies and gentlemen, to help ourselves step back in time, let us stand for the national anthem of the republic that might have been. Thank you."

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A solemn hornpipe began. Bullock might have found it un-Mountielike to stand for a pirate anthem, but not Bob Jones. Nor did he bat an eye when Patch marched and muttered to the stern to replace the Canadian flag with the Spangled Roger. The grinning ensign crackled in the wind like a hellish bonfire.

As the music stopped, Bullock saw their destination through the trees—a large stucco, fortlike structure with crenelated walls and square corner towers. For what remained of the trip, he prepared himself for registering at the lodge by surreptitiously consulting a small piece of paper. "Schenectady," he said under his breath. Then he closed his eyes. "S-c-h-e-n . . ."

The voice on the launch recording belonged to Elwell Blood, the lodge manager, a mild-mannered, fair-haired young man in striped pants and oxford jacket. Blood showed Bullock to his room personally.

"Scratch the sound-and-light show, I'm afraid," he said as they crossed the lobby. "You see, our mock-up of the Parliament Buildings was set up on Ghost Island, part of our property out behind us toward the American shore. Two weeks ago, Ghost Island vanished during the night, sound-and-light system and all. What do you think of that?"

"Don't ask me," said Bullock innocently. "I'm just a dumb American tourist."

Going upstairs, they met a shapely green-eyed blonde in a bikini coming down. "Miss Pentikov, meet our newest guest, Mr. Bob Jones," said Blood.

"Call me Marta, Bob," said the woman, giving Bullock the most alluring of smiles and the slowest of winks.

As they continued on their way, Blood said, "She'll be glad you're here. She and Mr. Bagshot haven't hit it off." Then he added, "Oh, say, I saw the look you gave Captain Patch when he dropped you off at the desk. No trouble, I hope?"

Bullock laughed. "Well, he did threaten to gut me like a pilchard. But I knew that was just for atmosphere."

"Oh, Grandad's gutted a few in his time," said Blood. "Bootleggers, mostly. Yes, we're all Thousand Islanders or their descendants here. When Prohibition came on strong, the big gangs moved in and scattered my people to the winds. Grandad went to work for a Bay Street stockbroker in Toronto. He claimed he liked the hack and slash of it. But I first remember him as a sad old man stumping around on

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the back porch on a Saturday afternoon with a cheese sandwich spindled on his hook and a three-draw telescope up to his good eye, staring in this direction where his heart was.

"The lodge was my dad's idea, a place where the old timers could work and live out their final years. He even sent me to hotel school in Switzerland. Then, like he was doing it on purpose, he died. We bought the place and restored it with Dad's insurance money."

"Business seems slow," observed Bullock.

"Three lousy guests isn't any great shakes," Blood admitted. "We're still a new concept in vacationing."

Bullock came out onto the wharf behind the lodge confident that no one would spot his blue-and-gold bathing suit as official issue patterned on the Mountie saddle blanket. Only minutes before, from his window, he had observed Marta Pentikov lying on her stomach in a glass-bottomed rowboat out in the river, peering down into the water through a porthole made by her hands. He crossed to where Patch was applying orange paint to the beak of one of the stable of swan pedal boats. "Be you have another glass-bottomed rowboat?" he asked.

Eyeing Bullock's midriff bulge, Patch twitched his hook and "pilchard" escaped from his muttering. He gestured riverward. "She be using the only one. That be where Ghost Island stood before it wasn't." He rolled his eye. "Be you thinking what I be thinking? Be you thinking she be an insurance investigator?"

"Ah, Ghost Island be'd insured then?"

"For big bucks," nodded Patch. "But harkee, why think you they call me 'Patch'? I be keeping all my boats dry and in sound repair. Overlooking the bird part, the swan next to the end rides like a squid jigger's dory."

A Mountie would have refused the swan boat with a scornful laugh. Not Bob Jones. "Just the ticket," he said, clambering aboard. "A little pedal upriver to work up an appetite for dinner." With a wave, Bullock pumped away from shore. He heard Patch call out something like "Watch out for Teddy!" Bullock smiled. Roosevelt's ghost must be a doozy to appear in broad daylight.

Bullock gave the glass-bottomed rowboat a wide berth. He'd float back down for a quick look-see when the woman had moved on. The wind at his back, he pedaled briskly upriver. Insurance might just explain the island's disappearance. He saw himself wrapping up the case overnight and hurrying back to Ottawa to get started on being

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a legend in his own time. From an island patio on his right, an elderly couple raised their gin and tonics in a friendly salute. Hail the Conquering Hero. Bullock returned the wave solemnly.

As he pedaled southwestward between two small islands, the glimpse of stately movement made him look back over his shoulder. Above the trees glided the tall afterdecks of an oceangoing bulk cargo ship out in the river channel, its destination a country with a flag unimagined when Bullock had pondered over his schoolboy geography. Youthful dreams of a sailor's life came rushing back and stayed with him until the ship slid out of sight.

Bullock turned face front again, the smile of pleasant recollection still on his lips, just in time to see disaster rushing up at him. The swan boat was heading full tilt for the gaping doorway of a tumbledown two-story boathouse on an island sprung from nowhere.

Abruptly, Bullock was engulfed in darkness. The swan boat thumped to a halt, sending him sprawling out onto the neck. Overhead came a short cry, as though someone had been surprised from sleep.

An ominous silence followed, one with a cocked ear in it. Bullock could make out an aluminum skiff with an outboard motor tied to a narrow platform. On investigation, he discovered the platform led to a rickety flight of steps up to a half opened door and a dark-cornered room. In those shadows, he made out the figure of a large-headed man with a slender body and fat feet. Bullock knocked and stepped inside.

"Sorry to crash in," he said with a smile in his voice. Silence. Moving further into the room, Bullock saw his man was an empty diver's outfit, steel helmet, rubber suit, and weighted boots hanging down from a rafter.

Something hard jabbed Bullock in the back. A voice wavering with age said, "Into the light and turn around so I can see what I've got."

Doing as he was told, Bullock came face to face with a withered old man with a cruel mouth wearing a dark, double-breasted pinstriped suit and a mauve shirt grown too big for his neck. But the man's submachine gun fit his bony grip perfectly. The Mounties called those old drum magazine models "cribbage-board makers."

The old man studied Bullock with calm, cold eyes before demanding, "Now just who the hell are you?"

"Bob Jones from Schenectady," said Bullock automatically.

The calm, cold eyes became amazed, then misted over. With a

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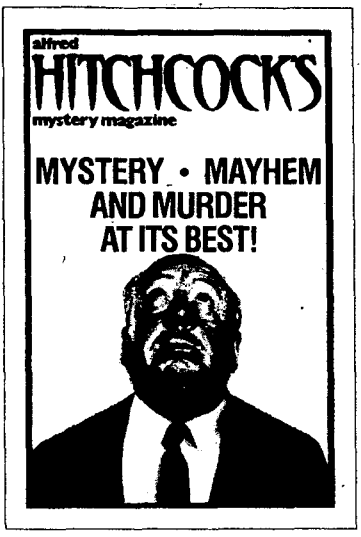
WATCH OUT!



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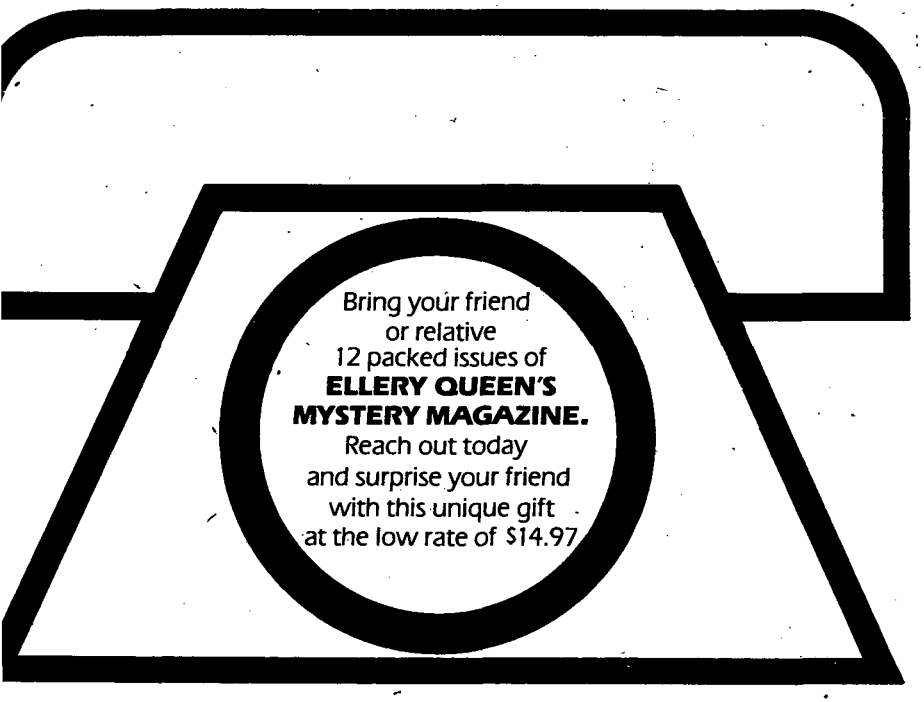

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heartfelt sob, the man collapsed into a nearby chair with the machine gun in his lap and buried his face in his liver-spotted hands.

At last he looked up, and in a voice still wet and windy said, "Oh, there was a lot of hooey going round about the Albany mob moving in and wiping out the Schenectady gang. But I knew you guys'd come back someday." He wiped his eyes in the crook of his arm and shook his head. "But, oh boy, there were times when it got lonely." He blinked and smiled. "Say, you must be Vito the Scumbag Jones' boy."

"You got it," said Bullock, preferring the lie to being turned into a cribbage board.

"I'll bet the Scumbag told you about old Mad Dog Manny Pincus, right? Him and me used to hunt pirates out here on the islands. Yes, sir, we left our share looking like tomcats that tried to take on a buzz saw. Back then, the Canadian G-men paid us a bounty on the ears." He laughed at the memory.

Bullock thought of poor earless Mr. Moon. And he recalled a story an old Mountie told. He'd worked the door at one of those secret powwow and potluck potlatches to initiate a new Governor General where all the MPs and their ladies came as Indian braves and princesses. Sneaking a peek inside, the Mountie swore that the regalia of the Queen's representative included a necklace of tanned human ears with gold earrings in them.

"This Ghost Island business, what a sweet setup down the drain," said Mad Dog. "But I don't have to tell you guys that."

"Right," said Bullock, faking a knowing smile. "So what happened to it?"

"Don't look at me," shrugged the old man. "I mean, I moved over here two years ago when the pirates started fixing up the lodge and sniffing around." He gestured at the diving gear. "Oh, I still kept the pipeline in good working order, though it meant hiring a local to work the air supply. But I don't have to tell you about the pipeline, right?

"Anyway, you know the deal. Whenever I needed money, I was to go stateside, turn on the spigot, and sell prime bootleg Canadian rye door to door. Recently, the soldier boys at Camp Tweed near Clayton been buying all I had to sell." Here Mad Dog jumped to his feet and crossed to a shuttered window. "You hear something?" He peered through a crack. "That Patch character's got a lot to pay me and your daddy back for."

"You were talking about Camp Tweed."

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"Right," said Mad Dog, leaving the window. "Well, I must be getting old because I let the top sergeant who was my inside man follow me back to the spigot after my last delivery. He sucker-punched me and when I came to the spigot was open with nothing coming out. A big rain and wind storm was moving in. In the lightning I saw a caravan of Army tank trucks rolling back toward the base. Next morning when I rowed out here, Ghost Island was gone."

Where? Bullock decided there was only one way to find out. Leading Mad Dog over to the stairs, he said, "I'll be back for you after nightfall. I'm diving down to poke around." To give the mobster a taste of his own medicine, he added, "I don't have to tell you why, right?"

Mad Dog was going down the steps ahead of him. He looked back over his shoulder with an old grin. "There's a lot of the Scumbag in you, kid."

Bullock took his place in the swan boat. Mad Dog gave him a healthy push off. Waving his submachine gun, he announced, "I'm going to run right out and get me a pirate for old time's sake." As Bullock passed out through the boathouse door, he thought he heard the old man shout, "Be careful of Teddy!"

He was now obliged to pedal around the island to lend a covert hand to Patch or whoever it was to escape from the bootlegger. He couldn't do much else without blowing his cover.

Ten minutes later, Bullock rounded the top of the island and started down the other side, moving faster now with the current behind him. He struggled to keep close to the high cliffs of the shore, alert for any sign of Mad Dog's quarry. Then he sensed a tangible increase in the current. In the next moment, the swan boat shot around an arm of the island and there it was! Bullock back-pedaled frantically. Those warnings hadn't been of a presidential ghost! It wasn't Teddy! It was *the eddy*, a whirling vortex of mad water spanning the forty feet between the island and its nearest neighbor!

The swan boat was caught up in it like a fly in a moving web. With maximum effort, Bullock managed to keep to the outer edge. But when his mighty leg muscles finally failed him, he knew he would be drawn into the evil-looking dimple at the eddy's damnable center. Looking away so as not to see his fate, he spied Mad Dog appear on the cliff above him. The old man stood there swaying, hands to his throat. When the hands dropped, they revealed raw flesh torn open as if by a hook. The mobster tried to speak to the

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sky, but blood came instead of words. Then he pitched downward into the swirling water. His body circled quickly to the center of the vortex, spun there several times like a propeller, and vanished down the dimple with a sucking noise.

In his astonishment, Bullock stopped pedaling and his swan boat sagged down the whirlpool slope. Maybe a man in a swan boat wouldn't get sucked under. Maybe he'd just end up spinning around and around until his blood thickened like the milk in a milk shake, cutting off the supply of oxygen to his brain. This terrible fate squeezed effort from Bullock's aching carcass. He pedaled with legs of lead and kneecaps that were balls of fire. But the deadly dimple loomed closer.

Suddenly a grappling hook line fell across his lap. Making a hitch around the swan's neck, Bullock turned grateful eyes out beyond the eddy's fatal grasp where Cleveland Bagshot rode in another swan boat. With a wave, the geologist started pedaling downriver. The rope went taut, charging the Mountie's weary legs with hope. Soon Bullock's swan boat was bobbing free in the current alongside Bagshot.

"I thought my number was up," said Bullock gratefully. But handing back the grappling hook, he thought to himself how easily it might tear out a human throat.

"Hell, we Schenectady guys have to stick together," said Bagshot.

Traveling back to the lodge, Bullock's eye was drawn to the place on the river where Ghost Island had been as the socket of a pulled tooth must draw the tongue. Caught looking, too, Bagshot smiled and asked, "Wasn't it Einstein who said, 'We can think objects away, but not the space they occupy?' "

Bullock sidestepped the trap skillfully. If he was too smart, they might suspect he was a Mountie. "What would a dumb cluck like me know about Einstein?" he asked.

With a hard look, Bagshot said, "Look, I had my reason for saving your life. I'm curious as hell about what happened to that island. I know where I can put my hands on some diving gear. But I need someone to handle the airpump."

"Well, I owe you one," said Bullock as Bob Jones would have. But blast it all, there had to be some way to get down under the water himself.

Death's Head Island loomed ahead. The shapely Marta Pentikov was stepping up out of the glass-bottomed rowboat while Patch

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watched without pausing in his task of cleaning something that might have been dried paint from his hook. As the swan boats approached, Marta turned and winked in Bullock's direction. He stroked his jaw. The woman was a mystery. When he and Bagshot started up the walk to the lodge, it didn't surprise Bullock at all that her wet footprints on the pavement looked like question marks.

Bullock changed and came back down into the lobby. If his case was dead in the water, at least the Bob Jones cover was working like a charm. Old Otto Duffy, the dramatics coach at the Mountie academy, always stressed getting under the skin of the thing or person they were pretending to be. Duffy once swore Bullock would never get beyond the little teapot short and stout. Smiling, Bullock wished the old guy could see him now. Then he turned into the Bucket of Grog cocktail lounge. Bob Jones was the kind who'd have a drink before dinner.

Elwell Blood was behind the bar dressed in a short white jacket. "What's your pleasure, Mr. Jones?"

"Bob Jones will have a strawberry daiquiri," said Bullock, remembering the name from somewhere.

"Enjoy your boat trip?" asked the young man as he started to mix the drink.

"Had to rescue some poor sap who'd got himself caught in the eddy," said Bullock, deciding Bob Jones was something of a liar and a braggart. "Say, I heard Ghost Island was insured. I guess the money'll come in handy, business as bad as it is."

Blood gave a sad smile as he put the drink in the mixer. "It isn't. I just told our people that to keep their spirits up. But not to worry. A morticians' convention's booked in for next month, three hundred strong. That should see us through." He delivered Bullock's frothy pink drink. "We'll worry about next year when it gets here."

Bullock had downed his drink in two gulps just as Marta Pentikov entered the bar, dressed for dinner. "Mind if I join you?" she asked in a soft warm voice.

"Be my guest," said Bullock, faking a leer. He decided Bob Jones, drinker of sissy drinks, was also a womanizer. "Barkeep, give the little lady what she's drinking and hit me again."

Marta lay a soft warm hand on Bullock's wrist and said earnestly, "Bob, I know Schenectady men are stand-up guys."

"Who says I'm from Schenectady?"

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"Come on," she said. "I'd know that Schenectady Yacht Club tie anywhere. I grew up there."

By godfrey, thought Bullock, does everybody come from Schenectady?

"Bob Jones," said Marta solemnly, "do you love your country?"

"I sure do," said Bullock, laughing inwardly. Little did she know.

"I thought so. When you work for the Central Intelligence Agency, you learn to spot things like that." She gave him a soft warm look. "Bob Jones, your country needs your help." She let Blood set down the drinks and return to the other end of the bar before continuing.

"We know the Canadians have been working on a Disintegrator Ray in a secret Ottawa installation disguised as a two-car garage. Ghost Island's disappearance probably means they've reached the testing stage. My job's to find out for sure. It could cause a drastic change in the world pecking order. Now, I can get hold of diving gear, but—"

"If you need somebody up top to handle the air supply, you're going to have to stand in line," said Bullock. "Bagshot got to me first."

"But that creep's a Russian spy."

"He saved my life," said Bullock. "I owe him one."

"You certainly do," agreed Bagshot, coming up behind them on crepe soles. "Mr. Blood, another round, please."

Marta stiffened. "Butt out, gulag face. —Bob," she insisted, "your country comes first."

"Say, why don't you both team up on the diving job?" asked Bullock.

"I'm not going to dive and put my life in the lovely hands of this running dog of the plutocratic bourgeoisie," insisted Bagshot.

"That goes ditto for me in spades," said Marta.

"Hey," said Bullock, a study in innocency, "what say I dive and report back my findings while you two keep an eye on each other in the boat?"

By godfrey, if they bought this he was back in the running for legend in his own time. His only problem was a growing suspicion that Bob Jones couldn't hold his liquor.

Under the water was darker than the night above. Bullock slid the weighted boots into the rungs of the wire ladder, feeling his way downward. Oxygen hissed in his ear. Marta's voice crackled down to him over the intercom. "Can you hear me, Bob?"

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"Loud and clear," he answered as his foot hit bottom. Bullock switched on the underwater torch tied to his wrist. Moving forward with a submerged traveler's dreamy gait, he shone the torch left and right and sent the fishes flashing through the stands of seaweed like startled birds.

Almost at once, he came upon a large weed-free oblong on the river floor. Investigating, he discovered it measured about a hundred and fifty feet long and seventy feet across. The long edges were trenches five feet deep and five feet across. Except for the helmet, Bullock would have scratched his head in wonderment.

"Found anything, Bob?" demanded Marta.

"Nothing yet," lied Bullock. The Canadian government was going to be the first to know what happened to Ghost Island.

But what had happened to it? Time for a bit of a think. Bullock found a comfortable rock, sat down, and crossed one leg over the other. It was almost as though the island had been unplugged from the river bottom. And equally puzzling was the identity of Mad Dog Manny Pincus' murderer. Patch, out of revenge? Or Bagshot or Marta, to get the diving gear? Or none of the above? He had too few clues and too many question marks. But maybe question marks were the answer.

"Come on, Bob," demanded Bagshot, interrupting him over the intercom. "What goes down there?"

"Nothing," insisted Bullock.

Forgetting to turn off the intercom, Bagshot repeated the "nothing" thoughtfully. Then he cursed in triumph. "Pentikov, what's left when you disintegrate something?"

"Nothing?" replied Marta uncertainly.

"Right! And what's the big jerk telling us he found? Nothing! Ghost Island's disintegrated." Bagshot's next words had a sinister cast. "And my people will be the first to know."

"A gun, that's not nice," said Marta. "We were to come unarmed. Not that I go anyplace without my good old Schenectady toothpick."

"Ugly things, those bill-hooked blades," said Bagshot. "Fortunately, you don't get to use it." Bullock heard a metal click, Bagshot's curse, another click, a moan of pain, a loud splash, and a woman's soft warm laugh of triumph.

Bullock stood up and came to attention as he always did when about to perform an official act. "Acting Sergeant Maynard Bullock of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police speaking," he declared. "Miss Marta Pentikov, you are under arrest for murder."

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"That was self-defense," she insisted.

"No, I arrest you for the murder of Mr. Mad Dog Manny Pincus," Bullock corrected her. "You slipped overboard from the glass-bottomed rowboat, swam to the island, and killed him."

"Prove it."

"If you insist," said Bullock, pacing up and down on the river bottom as though in a drawing room. "Captain Patch keeps his boats tight and dry. But when you walked back to the lodge, you left wet footprints behind you." Then Bullock heard the silence where the hiss of the oxygen had been. Good godfrey, he wondered, how did he get himself into these messes? He cleared his throat nervously. "Come along quietly, Miss Pentikov," he urged. "It'll go easier on you."

"Save your breath, Maynard," said Marta.

The intercom went dead. Bullock's first brilliant plan was to take off the weighted boots, bob to the surface like a cork, and take the knife away from her. But he couldn't unlace the boots with his gloves on. And he couldn't take off the gloves without opening the little window in his helmet and using his teeth on the leather glove straps.

Already the air was too thin for fancy plans. Bullock started for shore, any shore. But right off the bat, he tripped over a length of bootlegger's pipe and fell magnificently as a mighty underwater oak might fall. Was this the way it would all end? Bullock imagined good old Mavis, his wife, coming each year in widow's weeds to throw a nice bouquet on the water. When he hit the ground, he lay there wondering if he had any strength to muster for the impossible task ahead.

Then, suddenly, he was no longer alone inside the helmet. A rasping voice said, "Be you there, Bob Jones? Be you can hear me?"

The oxygen hissing cheerfully again, Bullock broke surface into a night bright with torches. Patch and Elwell Blood waited in the skiff, surrounded by swan boats filled with the Death's Head Island Lodge staff. Torchlight made all eyes wild and weapons formidable.

"Where's Miss Pentikov?" demanded Bullock as they helped him out of his diving gear.

"When I boarded the skiff, she came at me like a spitfire with a mean-looking knife," said Patch. "I be'd obliged to gut her like a pilchard."

Blood nodded. He wore a broad leather belt across the shoulder of his oxford jacket down to the scabbard and cutlass at his waist.

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He had an earring in every ear. "Mr. Jones," he explained, "the morticians' convention people called tonight to cancel. They're having a camp-out at Arlington National Cemetery instead. Of course, that means the end of all we worked for. Well, Grandad went along with me. And I promised if the lodge failed, I'd follow him and the rest down the pirate trail."

"Tonight we be going to capture the Western tax ship, be damned if we ain't," declared Patch, bringing much "aying" and weapon-waving from the swan boats.

Each month the income taxes withheld from Western Canadian paychecks came eastward by ship to Ottawa by way of Port Arthur on Lake Superior and the Thousand Islands. The ships were seamless impregnable steel, guarded by heavily armed Mounties. Each ship had its own air-and-water supply and well stocked larder. Bullock knew the Western tax ship's sergeant, Grant Midlothian, to be a fine amateur chef whose tea scones and butter tarts could turn mere coffee breaks and late-night snacks into gourmet revels.

"That be why we saved your hide alone, Bob Jones," said Patch. "Sign on and it's share and share alike. Otherwise—" He gutted the air.

"I'm with you," said Bullock quickly, figuring to play along for a bit.

"Harkee then, Bob," growled Patch. "One of our mates be working ashore for Gananoque Valet Service. Show him what you stole today, Long John."

An old runt of a sailor grinned and passed over Bullock's own uniform in plastic on a clothes hanger.

"He got the whole Mountie rig, did Long John," said Patch. "Mr. Moon be'd the right size but the hat kept slipping down over his eyes. I judge it'll fit you neat. Your job be to get us inside the tax ship."

"If I'm to be one of the boys, then fill me in on Ghost Island," insisted Bullock.

"Try submarine pens," said Blood. "Some Milwaukee Germans shipped it in in sections in 1915 before the States entered World War I. Our people floated it out here one night all camouflaged with dirt, paper grass, and potted trees. They opened the bilges. They lay a pipeline to bring diesel fuel from the New York side. The German U-boats used Ghost Island well until the Armistice. And it was our people's final hideout until the gangsters drove them off the islands. By then, real grass and trees had started to grow. But that's not

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what you want to know. You want to know where Ghost Island went to." He shrugged. "Search us."

Bullock listened as he dressed, growing taller as he put on each part of his uniform. He reckoned the Schenectady gang had stored their illegal whiskey in the bilges. When the Army boys drained off the last of it, Ghost Island simply broke loose in rough weather and drifted away. Bullock hitched up his belt and was pleased to find his service revolver in its holster.

"Mr. Moon remembered to bring it," said Blood. "He shined the shoes and cleaned any weapons he found under the pillows. It was part of the service."

Bullock stood up, waved his revolver, and announced, "I'm Acting Sergeant Maynard Bullock and you're all under arrest for conspiracy to commit grand larceny."

The pirates whooped with delight. No knee went unslapped or rib cage unelbowed. Mr. Moon roared so hard he tumbled overboard and had to be fished out. To sober things up, Bullock fired into the air. But the pistol only clicked. Puzzled, he looked down the barrel and tried again. Another click.

"Sleeping with a loaded pistol can be dangerous, Bob," advised Blood. "Mr. Moon always removed the bullets and left them in the lodge safe."

" 'Maynard Bullock'—that's rich," wheezed Patch as he started up the outboard. "Bob Jones, I like your style. Welcome aboard. Gibbet Island, here we come!"

Gibbet Island's name came from a giant elm on the shipping-channel shore once used for Thousand Islander justice. In this very same tree, Bullock and the pirates took their places with boarding lines tied to a high limb that extended out over the water. The pirates dangled their feet and drank rum straight from bottles. Blood had brought Bullock a thermos of daiquiris made from the last of the lodge strawberries. The Mountie sipped his drink, determined to deliver the pirates into the arms of Sergeant Midlothian's men by some clever ruse.

Patch wiped his mouth on his sleeve. "Hurrah for pirating, Bob Jones!" he cried. "Go to bed and get up whenever you please! Leave your vegetables on the plate or see how long you can go without a bath whenever you please! Wear a plaid tie with a striped shirt whenever you please! Aye, once you've tasted cutlass steel between your teeth, you'll never walk ashore again!"

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Bullock poured another drink and thought on that. Merciless Maynard, the Mountie Pirate King, hat-brim turned up at three corners, leads an iceboat attack on Ottawa up the frozen Rideau Canal. There he is, cutlass in each hand and reeking of strawberry daiquiris, kicking down RCMP Superintendent MacNaughton's door, making the man's jaw drop and the stuffed buffalo head on the wall blink. Yes, he'd settle the score then and there for promotions passed over, for the dirty ends of the assignment stick, for good old Mavis having to work part-time checkout at Loblaw's supermarket. And when he was done, he'd gut MacNaughton like a pilchard.

Bullock was startled by this savage daydream. Was this secret burden of resentment really his? Could a Mountie heart have its dark corners, too? He put the cap back on the thermos. The pirates stirred. A ship's running lights approached. "Get ready," growled Patch. Teeth bit down on cutlasses. "Get set!" Grips tightened on ropes. "Aw, wait," said Patch when he saw it was only a cattle boat. But the ten men on the end thought he said "Away!" and off they swung, led by Elwell Blood. They landed on the *Kenya Voyager*'s deck near fifty tall Masai herdsmen dressed in lion skins and leaning on their spears around an oil-drum fire. "Show no quarter, men!" cried Blood halfheartedly. The ship vanished behind some trees before the screams began.

"He be'd a good lad, Elwell. But dainty for a pirate," said Patch and hung his head in mourning.

"Captain Patch, sir," whispered Mr. Moon at last, announcing the approach of another ship. No mistake this time. She rode low in the water from the weight of her precious cargo.

Patch gauged the vessel's progress carefully. "Now!" he shouted, urging Bullock out into space with the flat of his cutlass. The little party swung down and skimmed the water before heading back upward to the deck of the ship.

They gathered in a sinister little knot. Pushing Bullock ahead of them, they reached the only way into the tax ship—a small door to the bridge. Bullock hesitated. He still hadn't come up with his clever ruse. But Patch raced past him and pounded on the door. A man's scowling, squinting face peered out at Bullock through the bullet-proof window. "Who the hell are you and where did you come from?" the man demanded.

When Bullock hesitated again, Patch shouted, "Open up! He be Acting Sergeant Maynard Bullock of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police!"

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Knowing he must save ship, crew, and cargo before these words could work their magic, Bullock shouted, "Don't believe him! I'm only Bob Jones, a big butter-and-egg man from Schenectady, New York!"

A smile overwhelmed the dour face behind the glass. "Why didn't you say so?" he said, unlocking the door. "My mother came from Schenectady."

Patch pushed Bullock through the door. In half a minute, the bridge was in pirate hands. Patch ignored the steel door leading down into the ship proper, a door that could only be opened from the other side. Instead, he unfolded a chart to show the captain their secret destination deep in the archipelago, where apparently they intended to starve out the Mountie guard.

Then Patch limped over with a cutlass in each hand and threw one down at Bullock's feet. "Schenectady, eh, Bob Jones?" he growled. "Aye, I spied a familiar cut to your jib. So you be Vito the Scumbag's spawn. I swore to settle with him or any of his who crossed my bow." He stepped back and raised his weapon. "To the death, son of the Scumbag!"

Bullock shook his head. "It's against the Mountie code to fight the physically handicapped."

"Then die where you stand!" roared Patch, lunging with fierce earnestness.

In that same instant, Bullock decided the Mountie code would permit him to defend himself provided he placed one hand over his left eye and hopped on his right foot. A cutlass thrust missed his heart by a hair's breadth. A slash pared felt from the brim of his hat. Bullock hopped over and snatched up his weapon. Patch caught the Mountie's roundhouse swing on his blade. They came to close quarters, hilt to hilt. Patch strained to push Bullock off balance to give the coup de grace. And he had the strength and craft of ten, being righteous with injuries unavenged. Using his hook, he pulled Bullock's hat down over his eyes and planted the metal ferrule of his pegleg down hard on the man's foot. Bellowing with pain, the Mountie grabbed up the injured foot and hopped around on the other.

The pirates cheered as if the pegleg blow was an old favorite. Patch mugged and rolled his good eye at the grandstand. Through his pain, Bullock decided it was do or die and hopped aggressively toward his antagonist. But Patch had only to raise a threatening pegleg to stop him dead in his tracks. As Bullock swallowed indecisively, the Schenectady cuckoo clock on the bridge, a gift from the

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Captain's mother, announced the hour. Simultaneously, the metal door down to the bowels of the ship flew open and a smiling Sergeant Grant Midlothian appeared with a large tray of hot cocoa and butter tarts. "Hello, Bullock," he remarked. "What're you doing here?"

The door struck Patch squarely in the back, driving him off balance and onto the point of Bullock's cutlass. The old man's curses ended in mid-mutter. The weapon dropped from his fingers. His only knee touched the deck and, giving Bullock a one-eyed glance, he pitched forward on his face.

Patch's death so demoralized Mr. Moon and the other pirates, they surrendered, a bereft crew that not even cocoa and butter tarts could comfort completely.

Bullock felt something of their pain. For Patch's final glance had said volumes. "I be dying, Maynard Bullock," it had declared. "Yet I be content a Mountie brought me down, a man who took the high road while others of us chose the low." And it said, "So furl the Spangled Roger forever and play the last slow hornpipe. Farewell to the last of the unfettered buccaneers, who never gave up a seat on the streetcar to nobody unless he pleased." Then it said, "No, don't mourn for old Patch. He died with his boot on. Just march straight and tall, a legend in your own time, the Mountie who solved the mystery of Ghost Island."

So spoke Patch's final glance. And Bullock was visibly moved. At least, the others on the bridge noticed him refuse a third butter tart.

The very next morning, the *Pavel Chichikov*, a factory ship serving the Russian fishing fleet off the coast of Newfoundland, vanished without a trace. A dying sailor found clinging to a folding chair compounded the mystery by babbling about striking an uncharted island and of a ship that sank in less time than it took him to witness a fiery pirate attack on the Parliament Buildings in Ottawa. Of course, Moscow and Washington dismissed these final ravings. Clearly, the Canadian Disintegrator Ray was far enough along that it could destroy a target at sea. So the Russian fishing fleet withdrew to international waters and the United States put the acid-rain problem on a front burner and abolished the tariff on Canadian cheddar cheese.

Back in Ottawa, they explained to Bullock why geopolitical considerations demanded the true story of the disappearance of Ghost Island never be told and why he would not become a legend in his own time after all. Bullock understood. He returned to his regular

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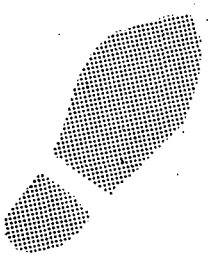
duty, guarding the flowerbeds on Parliament Hill. Yet sometimes during that magic hour right after lunch when Mountie daydreams come, he would prowl the halls of officialdom as Maynard the Merciless again, with blood in his eye, all cutlass, reek, and snarl, kicking in whatever door he pleased.



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ELLERY QUEEN'S MYSTERY NEWSLETTER

CRIME BEAT

by R. E. PORTER

MIDNIGHT LIBRARY: In another sign of growing reader interest in short mystery fiction, a major publisher has committed itself to a continuing series of mystery and suspense anthologies in hard covers. The Macmillan Midnight Library began publication last June with *Child's Ploy,* a fine new collection of 19 stories involving children, edited by Marcia Muller and Bill Pronzini (Macmillan, $16.95). One or two books a year are planned, with *Witches' Brew,* mysteries about women, due this fall. It'll be followed by *Dark Lessons,* mystery in the academic world, and *Kill or Cure,* mystery in the world of medicine.

MYSTERY CRUISE: A week-long Mystery Cruise from Los Angeles to Puerto Vallarta and Mazatlan on the Mexican coast is planned by *The Saint Magazine* for November 4–11. Events will include a challenge to solve a crime caper written by John Ball. If you're interested you'll have to hurry. Final payment ($895 to $1,235 per person) is due by September 21. Contact Ruth Griffiths, Tops in Tours, 22030 Ventura Blvd., Woodland Hills, CA 91360. Phone: (818) 992-3455.

RADIO PLAYS: The Friends of Bogie's, a production company that presents monthly radio mystery dramas at Bogie's Restaurant, 249 West 26th Street, New York, has now made 13 of its most popular shows available on tape at $6.00 each. A descriptive list is available from Zppr Productions, Inc., 201 First Avenue, New York, NY 10003. If you're in New York, drop by Bogie's on the fourth Sunday of every month at 8 P.M. for their Sinister Sundays. In addition to the radio drama, there's usually a talk and autographing session by a well known mystery writer.

PENGUIN OMNIBUSES: Over the past two years, Penguin Books has been adding to its impressive list of mystery omnibuses in trade paperback editions. The series now includes *The Margery Allingham Omnibus, The John Franklin Bardin Omnibus, The Michael Innes Omnibus,* and *The Julian Symons Omnibus.* Additional titles published in England but not yet avail-

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able here (except through some mystery bookshops) include *The Second Michael Innes Omnibus, The First Rex Stout Omnibus,* and *The Penguin Classic Crime Omnibus,* a fine new anthology of short stories edited by Julian Symons.

CRIME CLASSICS: International Polygonics, a small publisher whose Library of Crime Classics is doing a splendid job of reprinting the works of two fine writers, Lillian de la Torre and Margaret Millar, also recently published new editions of S. S. Rafferty's *Cork of the Colonies* (a retitling of his 1979 collection of Captain Cork stories, mainly from *EQMM* and *AHMM*), and the long-unavailable British mystery *A Bullet in the Ballet* (1937) by Caryl Brahms and S. J. Simon, with a new Introduction by Ned Sherrin. The trade paperbacks are $5.00 each, and deserve a place in your library.

BOUCHERCON REMINDER: There's still time to sign up for Bouchercon XV at Chicago's Americana-Congress Hotel, October 26–28. Guest of Honor is Bill Pronzini, and among the highlights will be panel discussions, films, and presentation of the third annual Private Eye Writers of America awards. This year's Bouchercon is co-sponsored by the Midwest Chapter of Mystery Writers of America, and details may be obtained from: Bouchercon XV, Box 576, Hinsdale, IL 60521.

LETTERZINE: Mystery & Detective Monthly, a fan publication described as a "letterzine" and made up mainly of letters from fans, has begun publication. Sample issues are $2.00 and a yearly subscription is $19.00, from Bob Napier, 14411-C South C Street, Tacoma, WA 98444.

SPY SOCIETY: The first annual Oppy Award, named in honor of E. Phillips Oppenheim, has been presented by the International Spy Society to *The Last Supper* by Charles McCarry (Dutton) as the best spy novel of 1983.

COMING ATTRACTIONS: Due in November from The Mysterious Press is *The Eyes Have It,* edited by Robert Randisi, the first anthology of the Private Eye Writers of America.

The stories were all written especially for this book, and include Lawrence Block's new Matt Scudder tale "By the Dawn's Early Light," which appeared in the August issue of *Playboy.*

Martin Greenberg and Francis M. Nevins, Jr. are editing an anthology of stories that were adapted for the Alfred Hitchcock television series. Titled *Hitchcock in Prime Time,* it's due next year from Avon.

James Grady, author of *Six Days of the Condor,* has a new novel, *Runner in the Street,* coming from Macmillan this fall.

Len Deighton is said to be working on a sequel to his recent best-seller, *Berlin Game.*

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BLOODY VISIONS

by CHRIS STEINBRUNNER

The Cannes Film Festival is an annual supermarket of films, a yearly gathering of film buyers looking for products to run in your neighborhood movie theater. Once a year a languid, sun-baked French beach resort is transformed into a Babel of international movie and television distributors shuttling from screening to screening—intercepted, many have said, by what seems like every pickpocket and gypsy in Europe. This year, a good many mystery films have shown up at the festival.

The major titles have already been guaranteed American circulation. Sergio Leone's *Once Upon a Time in America,* a gritty, epic look at a New York gangster empire across four decades starring Robert De Niro and James Woods, was generally disappointing to festival audiences uncomfortable with its length and almost mystical chronology. Nearly an hour has now been chopped from the film and it has been re-edited so that the story flows in order from past to present—much to Leone's unhappiness. *Another Country,* the British stage play about the tormented schooldays of future spies Guy Burgess and Donald MacLean, has been opened up into an absorbing film which has already been slated for the American arthouse circuit. And thriller writer Sidney Sheldon's first novel, *The Naked Face,* has been handsomely mounted into a movie starring Roger Moore as a psychiatrist trying to clear himself of the suspicion he has murdered his patient and his secretary. Rod Steiger as a surly policeman and especially Art Carney as an eccentric, elderly private eye do well here. All the above titles have American playdates.

For other films shown at Cannes, the path to movie houses over here is far from sure (although cable and television syndication will absorb many titles which don't make it). Other American entries include mystery subjects as well. *Scream for Help,* directed by Michael Winner from a screenplay by Tom Holland (who did *Psycho II*), tells of a teenager who is certain her stepfather is about to murder her mother. In *Blind Date,* an American thriller filmed in Athens, Joseph Bottoms is a blind young executive with a computerized eye implant which allows him with difficulty to move about—just well enough to stalk and capture a maniac who has been killing young women. *Fear City* also deals with a maniac killer, but the setting this time is the U.S. urban underworld. Tom Berenger plays a talent agent trying to prevent more of his dancer clients from being murdered. Also in the film noir vein, but a film which has already received attention elsewhere, is *Blood*

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Simple, an absorbing, steamy tale of the events that are triggered when the owner of a Texas small-town bar hires someone to eliminate his two-timing wife. Another new film noir of promise is *Vamping,* set of all places in Buffalo, New York, a moody story about a small-town thief (Patrick Duffy) who breaks into the homes of the recently deceased while the funeral is going on elsewhere. This time he runs into the widow and falls in love.

Other American mystery film entries include a fair number of spy films (Robert Mitchum stars as a diplomat caught up in terrorism in *The Ambassabor*), caper comedies (Richard Lester has energetically directed *Finders Keepers,* in which a train-load of oddballs pursues five million dollars hidden in a coffin in the baggage car), and horror melodramas (*The Last Horror Film,* in which Caroline Munro is pursued, is actually set at the Cannes Film Festival and was filmed at a previous year's gathering). Some interesting cinema from other countries will probably sell to the American market as well. There have been thriller entries from Australia (*Reunion,* about a terrorist on the run) and New Zealand (*Trial Run,* a wife leaves her husband and children to photograph penguins on an isolated coast, but danger pursues).

Submissions from other countries include Germany —in *Trauma,* a private eye's woman assistant is being driven to suicide—and, of course, many from England, ranging from *The Hit*—retired gangster Terence Stamp avenged by fellow criminals—and Agatha Christie's *Ordeal by Innocence,* a gratefully traditional whodunit with Donald Sutherland and Faye Dunaway.

Mystery films were not the only genre unspooled at Cannes, although they were well represented. The only gathering which restricts itself only to the cinema of mystery, and awards prizes as well, is Mystfest, the Italian International Mystery Film Festival held yearly at Cattolica, a resort town on the Adriatic Coast. Your columnist has been invited to be a judge at Mystfest this year, its fifth annual week of suspense and dark deeds. Look for a report in a future issue of EQMM.

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THE JURY BOX
by ALLEN J. HUBIN

World War II remains the most productive historical source for suspense fiction. Two sub-genres can be discerned. One finds re-

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nascent Nazis in more contemporary years and explores their deadly schemes, all derived from wartime Germany. The other and more imaginative type, set during the war, postulates a historically possible situation or explanation of known events and wraps a plausible suspense plot around it.

A chillingly effective example of the second type is *The Berlin Warning* by Nicholas Guild (Putnam, $16.95). The time is late 1941. Hitler doesn't want the U.S. in the war. He learns of Japanese plans for Hawaii and sends a warning note to Roosevelt. England, convinced its days are numbered without direct U.S. involvement, will do anything to prevent delivery of the warning. It hires David Steadman to steal the note when it passes through Sweden. Then Steadman is to be killed, in case he read the note against orders. But Steadman likes to do things his way, even if it means a race across Europe with both the S.S. and the British eager to cut his throat. Guild handles the action and suspense magnificently.

World War I also serves, though much less frequently, as the basis for such fiction. An example is *The King's Commissar* (St. Martin's, $13.95) by Duncan Kyle. This amends military and economic history, neatly linking past and present, as a new executive questions why his London merchant bank has been paying 50,000 pounds into a Swiss account each year for sixty years. Against advice, he pushes his inquiry, opening a Pandora's box involving the all-powerful financier Zaharoff, the King of England, Lenin, and a naval officer commissioned to get Russia's just deposed and fabulously wealthy Romanovs out of that country. Ingenious storytelling.

An innocent caught in the inexorably grinding machinery of espionage—that's a reliable theme, and well explored by Jack Gerson in *The Whitehall Sanction* (Beaufort, $14.95). London antique dealer James Ryder gives a lift to a woman journalist whose car breaks down. She subsequently disappears, the police are if anything only suspicious of *him,* and a murdered body shortly turns up in the trunk of his car. All this may have to do with a secret part of British Intelligence, which has perhaps turned rogue under new leadership. If so, it seems fatal to have any knowledge of it, and everyone's loyalty is suspect. Where can Ryder turn even for belief, if not help? A grimly absorbing portrait.

David Morrell's latest, *The Brotherhood of the Rose* (St. Martin's, $15.95), offers finely crafted international intrigue, full of confused loyalties, deadly double dealing, consuming revenge. Saul and Chris were orphans, picked early by Edward Eliot of the CIA, groomed into superb agents, taught to think of Eliot more as father than spy boss. Now Saul is old for his job, thirty-seven, and his assignments go less well. He obediently detonates a houseful of American oil executives, and someone—can it be Eliot?—sends killers after him. Chris is also under contract for death; and how does

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this all relate to a network of safe houses established in 1938 by the heads of the Intelligence services of the U.S., Germany, France, England, and Russia?

The situations in *Necessity* (St. Martin's, $13.95) are inherently suspenseful, and author Brian Garfield does very well with his materials. A woman is on the run from her powerful, enraged husband. He has their fourteen-month-old daughter; she has stolen about $500,000 of his heroin earnings. She is determined to rescue the daughter. How can she make herself untraceable? How can she retrieve her daughter and keep her life?

The delightful Superintendent Richard Jury series by Martha Grimes continues with *The Dirty Duck* (Little Brown, $14.95). Here an American tour group in Stratford is struck by double tragedy: a nine-year-old boy disappears without trace, and a plain spinster from Sarasota is carved to death with a razor. Jury is in the vicinity, attracted neither by crime nor matters Shakespearean, but rather by the distant hope that he might chance upon a lady for whom he pines.

Reluctantly drawn into the grisly misfortunes of the touring Americans, he finds that the razor artist is not finished. Smooth, literate, ironic, witty storytelling.

The sixth appearance of Conan Flagg, bookseller and occasional investigator in a town on the Oregon coast, is *Wake Up, Darlin' Corey* by M. K. Wren (Doubleday, $11.95). Corey won't ever wake up, because she and her car went off a high road into the Pacific. She and others had opposed development of a coastal area on environmental grounds; her death follows closely on her revelation that she had evidence to stop sale of the land to developers. The official verdict, reached in unseemly haste, is accidental death. Flagg, not convinced, is willing to spend his time and money stirring a potful of unlovely people to see what surfaces. Good work, with nice integration of plot, setting, and weather, and with an impressively cinematic denouement.

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Lara thought she saw a figure running away from the house toward the lake and began chasing it. But beyond the lawn, the path was covered with acorns. She stumbled, and whoever it was got away . . .

WINDFALL

by MARY AMLAW

When Lara Lambert answered the front door of the Winthrop mansion to find Sheriff Alan Driscoll on the threshold, her pale face, colorless except for the brilliant blue of her eyes, grew paler still.

"Have you come to arrest me, Alan?" Her voice scarcely disturbed the air in the gloomy reception hall, a dark-paneled room that seemed to reject the October sunlight flooding the doorway.

"It looks bad," Alan admitted.

Amanda Winthrop, Lara's aunt, had been smothered in her bed with an oversize goosedown pillow. Lara, who had given up her own life to care for the old woman for the last five years, had been seen by her cousin Oliver running from the terrace outside her aunt's room just after the murder. And although Lara at first seemed to have no motive—she had been orphaned in her teens and her aunt had not only seen to it that she completed her education but had provided her with a modest income, which was to stop on old Mrs. Winthrop's death—the executor of the estate had disclosed that Lara was her aunt's major heiress. The other relatives would receive only token inheritances.

Lara's beautiful eyes darkened with tension. Her blonde hair, soft as dandelion fluff, was the only spot of color in the forbidding hall. Alan's eyes kept straying to it.

"I didn't kill my aunt," Lara said softly, "but I have no way to prove it. And now that she's left me three million dollars—" her voice trailed away.

"Tell me who was here in the house the day she died," Alan said.

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"What everybody was doing—anything you can think of that might be helpful. I'd like to question the others, too."

Lara moved away from the door and led him to a small sitting room off the hall. She gestured him to a large velvet armchair. There was more light here, and in it Lara looked paler than ever as she perched nervously on the Chippendale sofa opposite.

"I was here, of course." She took a deep breath. "My cousin Oliver and his wife Rita arrived the day before for their annual duty visit. Steven Calloway, Aunt's stepson, was here, of course—he lives here." Her long fingers moved restlessly over the fabric of the sofa. "Aunt excused herself after lunch, saying she felt tired and wanted to rest. This wasn't unusual. She was eighty-four and had a heart condition. She asked me to read to her until she fell asleep. As soon as she was dozing, I left the room. Rita and I were going into town to do some shopping."

"Could I have a look at your aunt's bedroom?" Driscoll asked.

Without a word, Lara rose and showed him to a suite on the first floor opposite the sitting room. It was the size of a modern studio apartment, and Alan felt overshadowed by the enormous dresser, the big mahogany bed canopied with rich hangings, and the row of French doors that opened onto a terrace overlooking manicured lawns. Although it was a splendid fall day, the air in the bedroom seemed too heavy to breathe.

"I left Aunt here, in her bed, and ran upstairs to freshen up," Lara said. "When I came down, Rita was waiting for me in the hall. I looked in on Aunt to make sure she was comfortable and had everything she needed. I look—looked—in on her frequently. Rita was annoyed. She said if I went in, I'd be sure to wake her up, and we wouldn't be able to get away." Lara frowned. "I couldn't get in. The door behind us, leading into the hall, was locked from the inside."

"Was that unusual?" Alan asked.

"Very. Aunt always left all her doors open in good weather, including the French doors onto the terrace. I became alarmed when she didn't respond to my knocking and told Rita something must be wrong. Rita said that was nonsense, that Aunt was a contrary old woman who loved to keep the household on edge and she must have locked the door herself to cause us concern. But I was uneasy, and I ran outside to see if I could enter Aunt's room from the terrace."

"And Rita remained in the hall?"

"Only for a few moments. When I didn't return at once, she followed me outside. The French doors were open, but I didn't go into

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Aunt's room because I thought I glimpsed a figure running away from the house toward the lake and began chasing it. But beyond the lawn, the path was covered with acorns. I stumbled, and whoever it was got away."

"Was it a man or a woman?" Alan asked.

"I couldn't tell. The trees are very thick beyond the lawn and the sun was shining on the leaves. There was a light breeze, and between the movement and the autumn color I was only aware of a figure moving away through the trees. After I stumbled, I lost sight of it."

"Would you take me over the path, please?" Alan asked.

Lara led him through the hallway, out the front door, and around to the terrace. "This is the way I came from Aunt's room," she said. She gestured down a gently sloping path that bisected the lawn and vanished in a patch of woods.

"The path turns a little farther on, and that's where I stumbled."

The woods blazed with brilliant shades of scarlet and gold. Pebbles and acorns were thick underfoot as Alan and Lara walked deeper into the woods. A slight gust of wind brought acorns down in a shower.

Lara stopped a little beyond the turn, where the path began to slope downward toward the lake. "I slipped just about here. By the time I got to my feet, whoever it was had disappeared. I followed the path until the lake was in full view, but there was no one in sight and it seemed useless, so I returned to the house."

Alan had her walk with him until they could see the lake plainly, calm as glass except for slight ruffles of wavelets near the shore. Then they retraced their steps to the terrace. If there had been someone, Alan mused, he could easily have hidden in the woods when Lara stumbled.

"When I got back here to the terrace, Oliver and Rita were both here," Lara said. "He had been up on the rise, had seen me running, and came as fast as he could to see what was the matter."

Alan noted the dirt path leading up the small hill. He could see the silhouette of a bench on its crest, near a massive oak tree.

"I told Oliver about the person I thought I'd seen, and that Aunt's door was locked and I was concerned," Lara resumed, her voice unsteady. "All three of us went into her room through one of the French doors. We found Aunt dead." Tears came to Lara's eyes. She bent her head and wiped them away with her slender fingers.

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"Perhaps one of the others might remember something that would provide a clue," Alan suggested.

Lara shook her head. "The only suspicious thing anyone admits seeing points to me."

Alan spoke to Rita Winthrop next. Small and brunette, her makeup perfect, she didn't seem particularly grieved by old Mrs. Winthrop's death.

"I'm not sorry she's gone," Rita said in a cold, well modulated voice. "She was an absolute tyrant, always threatening us with her will. She changed that will the way other people change their minds. I told Oliver he was crazy to hope for anything from her, but he was convinced she'd never cut him out. Instead, Lara gets everything!" She implied with a scornful sweep of her arm that Lara had deliberately ingratiated herself with her aunt in order to inherit.

And maybe she had, Alan thought. He liked Lara because she seemed kind, and her looks would dispose any man in her favor, but that didn't made her innocent.

Rita corroborated Lara's story. "I was in the front hall and Lara tried to look in on Amanda but the door was locked. I followed her outside to the terrace, but I didn't see whoever she claims she was chasing. Oliver came down from the hill, and when Lara returned we went in together and found Mrs. Winthrop dead."

Oliver Winthrop was a sandy-haired man in his thirties, with a perpetual smile that had no more warmth than a halloween mask. He treated everybody with an offhand charm and his mission in life seemed to be to enjoy himself to the hilt. Well, he had the money to do it, Alan mused. He had inherited six million from his parents and rumor had it he had parlayed that into several millions more.

"I was strolling on the grounds," he said with an air of extreme cooperation. "It was a beautiful day to be outdoors. When I reached the top of the rise, I sat on the bench there to enjoy the view. It's possible to see the lake from there, as well as the house. The sun was warm and the air delightful. I sat there for the better part of an hour, mulling over business problems."

"You have business problems?" Alan said.

"I deal in commodities," Oliver told him. "There are always problems."

"Money problems?" Alan asked.

Oliver gave him a withering smile. "I have been very successful

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in my business," he replied in the tone of a king reprimanding an impertinent peasant.

Alan accepted the reprimand. "You were enjoying the view for nearly an hour, you said."

Oliver nodded. "It was pleasant in the sun, very restful. I was returning to the house, quite refreshed, when I saw Lara come tearing around the terrace and take off toward the lake. Naturally, I wondered if anything was wrong and came at a run. I met Rita on the terrace. Lara joined us later, claiming she had been chasing an intruder. The three of us went to see if Aunt was all right and found her dead."

Suddenly Oliver's lofty manner changed. He leaned toward Alan in a confidential way. "It's absurd to think Lara murdered Aunt Amanda," he said unctuously, "but there was no trace of an intruder and it doesn't take much strength to hold a pillow over an old woman's face."

"Then you're suggesting Lara did murder her aunt."

"It makes sense, doesn't it? Aunt had Lara worn to a frazzle looking after her. She was a tyrant."

"Lara could have left at any time," Alan said.

"Not without money. She didn't have a bean of her own. If she found out Aunt had made her the major heiress, she couldn't be blamed for seizing the opportunity to escape from a life of slavery. Kill the old woman, make it look like an intruder did it, collect the inheritance, and be off to have a high old time at last. It's the only theory that makes sense."

Steven Calloway, a handsome man in his late fifties with a thick head of silver hair, had the friendly gaze and warm handshake of a born con man. "I was playing golf," he said fruitily. "It was a wonderful day to be outdoors—even more pleasant than today, if a bit on the windy side." Calloway had played with a threesome and gave Alan their names. "They'll back me up," he said confidently.

"I'll check on it," Alan assured him, but he felt it would be wasted effort. Calloway didn't seem to have the brains to plot a murder. After a pro-forma questioning, Alan dismissed him and walked the gentle slope to the top of the hill to add his own observations to Oliver's story. He strolled slowly, enjoying the warm autumn air. Leaves drifted earthward in clusters, borne on a pleasant breeze. From the top of the rise he could see the lake and look down on the house. The terrace was clearly visible. Oliver could indeed have seen

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Lara from here. And if there had been an intruder, he would have seen that as well.

Alan sat on the bench to think. A brick wall that led into the gardens looped its way around the bench and the massive oak filtered the sunlight overhead. It was a pleasant spot to rest.

Or should have been. The leaves rustled overhead, followed by a noise like rifle fire. Alan leaped to his feet, looking for the source of the noise. It fell on the eardrums as sharply as pain, destroying the peaceful atmosphere. Even as Alan looked up, it came again—and then again. Alan began to grin.

"I'm taking you in for further questioning," Alan told Oliver Winthrop with great pleasure.

Oliver put on his coldly charming smile. "I've told you all I could."

Alan shook his head. "You were the intruder Lara was chasing. You eluded her by stepping off the path, doubling back, and reaching the terrace before her. Your wife lied to protect you by claiming she had seen you come down the path from the hill. You killed your aunt."

"You can't prove that," Oliver said, the smile gone. "You won't enjoy being sued for false arrest, I assure you. You haven't a shred of evidence."

For answer, Alan opened his palm. "Your accuser," he said. On his palm rested an acorn.

"When you claimed to rest for an hour on the bench at the top of the rise, you forgot that the tree shading it is an oak. This has been a bumper year for acorns, Mr. Winthrop. They're rattling down in handfuls and hitting that brick walk like gunfire. Nobody but a deaf man could have sat for an hour in that noise—and even a deaf man wouldn't sit on that bench under the oak and be pelted over and over again by acorns! You lied. Why would you lie about your whereabouts, unless you were busy murdering your aunt?"

"What amazes me," Lara said the next day, after Oliver had confessed, "is that he could have gone through so much money so quickly."

"Playing the commodities market will do it," Alan said. "Oliver couldn't face life without money, so he came to your aunt hoping she'd bail him out."

"And instead she told him he'd never get more than a token inheritance from her."

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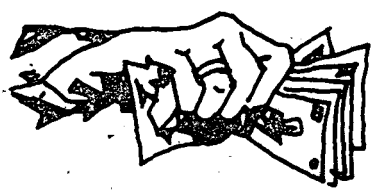
"Yes—and that you would inherit most of the estate. He killed her, then tried to make it seem you had done it. If you had been arested and convicted, the estate would have gone to Oliver."

Lara looked thoughtful: "Aunt never once let me think I'd be rich," she said. "She educated me so I could make my own living. This windfall was quite a surprise."

"I suppose you'll be leaving here now," Alan said, wondering why he cared, and wondering even more what he could do about it. He was hardly in a position to woo an heiress.

"I don't think so. This is my home, and—" she gave him a smile that lit up the room "—I think I may have found reason to stay."



DETECTIVERSE

WHEELING DEALING

by FRANCIS T. CLEARY

There was a young robber named Wheeling,
Who was ever so clever at stealing.
With English precise,
He made off with much ice,
And the money he made was appealing.

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a *NEW* short story by

ROBERT EDWARD ECKELS

"Since I was in Europe anyway," Alcott said, "it seemed a shame not to come back and renew acquaintances."

"We know your acquaintances," said the Customs officer. "You'll find most of them in jail . . ."

THE EXPORT SPECIALIST

by ROBERT EDWARD ECKELS

The big KLM jet seemed to float one last moment, then the wheels bumped down and gravity resumed its normal functions. The man seated next to Alcott sighed audibly.

"I always feel better when these things touch down," he said. He was sixtyish, portly, and very obviously British, "Damned unnatural thing, flying. Too fast, too. Miss everything in between. But economics over sensibility. Can't afford not to." He glanced appraisingly at Alcott. "Travel much, do you?"

"Some," Alcott said. "Not as much as I used to."

"Business or pleasure?"

"A little of both."

"Best way," the Englishman said. "And you'll find Amsterdam a good place for that. Either one. Your first time here?"

"No," Alcott said.

"Mine neither," the Englishman said and was silent the rest of the time it took the big plane to trundle up to the exit ramp.

Alcott waited until the plane had almost emptied, then got his carry-on bag and topcoat from the overhead compartment and made his way out to join the throng of passengers queueing up to clear Customs. He had moved up to within three places of the harried

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inspector and was just beginning to think he might be able to get through without trouble when he felt a light touch on his elbow.

"I wonder if I might see your passport for a moment, please, sir."

The man spoke in English with what sounded to Alcott's American ear to be a British accent, but the blond hair and square face proclaimed him Dutch, as did the trim Customs-service uniform he wore. Wordlessly, Alcott passed his passport over. The Customs officer glanced inside, then nodded as if he had just confirmed something he already knew, which Alcott suspected he had.

"Very good, Mr. Alcott," he said. "If you'll just come with me now, Inspector van der Myde would like to have a word with you."

"What about?"

"You'll have to ask him that," the Customs officer said. Pointedly he made no effort to return Alcott's passport. "Really, sir, it would be best. —No," he added quickly as Alcott made to reach for his bags, "you don't have to worry about those. A porter will bring them along. Now if you don't mind—" He looked at Alcott expectantly.

And, shrugging, because there was really no choice, Alcott went with him out away from the crowded reception area and up a short flight of stairs to a small office overlooking the now empty loading/unloading zone.

It was furnished simply with a single file-cabinet, a low table similar to the ones used in the regular inspection stations, and a desk behind which a grey-haired man in civilian clothes sat. The blond Customs officer placed Alcott's passport in front of him.

"This is the man," he said.

"Thank you," van der Myde said. His voice had a dry edge to it, almost cutting—as if, Alcott thought, he were a man so used to authority and getting his own way that it was inconceivable to him that things wouldn't work out the way he anticipated—and that others wouldn't realize it as well.

He took his time now, leafing through Alcott's passport before finally looking up. "It's been a long time, Mr. Alcott," he said. "So long, in fact, that we were beginning to think you'd forgotten us. Fortunately, however, or unfortunately, I suppose, depending on your point of view, our memories aren't so short. Nor are those of our colleagues in France. They telexed us to expect you."

"And did they telex you as well that they searched my luggage several times and found nothing? Really, Inspector, this is all uncalled for. Just because a man makes a mistake—"

Van der Myde's eyebrows rose. "*A* mistake?" he said. "Implying

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once? Come now, Mr. Alcott, you do yourself an injustice. How many years was it? How many little 'exploits'?"

Alcott shrugged. "All right," he said. "So I was a professional smuggler. But I quit a long time ago. Hell, I had no choice. I was so well known I couldn't walk across the street to buy a postage stamp without tripping over half a dozen Customs men out to check what was between the glue and the paper."

"And, of course, you feel no temptation now to return to your old ways."

"Hardly," Alcott said. "I don't need to, for one thing. I'm married now—have been for almost eight years. And for about seven of those eight years I've had a very good thing going, managing my wife's family business."

"Perhaps you wouldn't mind explaining then the purpose of your return to the Netherlands."

"Not at all," Alcott said. "I was in Paris for an EDP conference—"

"EDP?"

"Electronic Data Processing," Alcott said. "That's our business. We manufacture half calculators, small personal computers, that sort of thing. In any case, since I was in Europe anyway, it seemed a shame not to come back and renew acquaintances—"

"We know your acquaintances," the blond man said. "You'll find most of them in jail."

"I was about to say," Alcott said, "renew acquaintances with the city. My mother's family was from here originally. Or didn't you know that?"

"It's probably in the file," van der Myde said offhandedly. "But no matter." He glanced over at the table where a porter had deposited Alcott's luggage. "I'm required to ask you if you have anything to declare," he said.

Alcott shook his head. "Not that I'm aware of."

"No alcohol, tobacco, or perfume? Drugs?"

Alcott looked at him squarely. "You don't have to ask that," he said, "because even on my worst day I never handled drugs. And you know it."

"Yes," van der Myde said, nodding slowly, "I'll give you that. No drugs and no guns. But just about everything else."

Alcott shrugged deprecatingly. "I won't deny that," he said. "And I do have a small bottle of perfume I bought for my wife in Paris. I think it's under the limit, but if it isn't then I'll gladly pay the duty—here and in the United States."

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"And that's all?"

Alcott nodded.

"Would you open your bags then, please?"

"They're not locked."

"I would still prefer that you open them."

Alcott shrugged again and unfastened the catches on his luggage, then stepped back and watched interestedly while the blond man went through them.

When the Customs officer finished, he looked over at van der Myde. "As he says, one bottle of perfume." He glanced down at the label. "Arpege. Also two paperbacked books—in French."

"*The Count of Monte Cristo* and *Les Miserables*," Alcott said. "I got them for my nephew. He's studying French this year at school."

"Quite the tourist, aren't you?" van der Myde said.

"That's what I've been trying to tell you. People do change."

"Yes," van der Myde said, "and for your sake, I hope you have. In any case, you are free to go. Enjoy your—ah—sentimental journey."

"I plan to," Alcott said.

"Well, Triemstra," van der Myde said to the Customs officer after Alcott had reclosed his luggage and left, "what do you think?"

"It could be the truth," the blond man said, "but I wouldn't bet on it. I'd have him watched."

"You think that would do any good?"

"It certainly wouldn't hurt."

"Perhaps not," van der Myde said reflectively. "But I'm afraid with Mr. Alcott that isn't quite good enough."

Outside, the subject of their discussion paused for a moment and let the bustle in and out of the airport flow around him. The Customs men had held him up long enough so that he had missed the scheduled bus into the center of town and he was trying to decide whether to wait for the next one or try to find a cab when he became aware that his name was being called. He turned to find a large young man in an open leather jacket and crushed chauffeur's cap grinning at him.

"By George," the young man said, "I thought it was you. You don't remember me, do you? Pauli Ostermann. I used to work for Groot Hendricks. I sure remember you, though. Groot pointed you out any number of times."

"It seems everybody remembers me these days," Alcott said drily.

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"Well, why not?" Pauli said. "Groot always said you were the best in the business—after him, of course. But what are we standing around here for? You're going into town, aren't you? Let me drive you."

Without waiting for a response, he began gathering up Alcott's luggage. Alcott hesitated, then shrugged and followed Pauli over to a battered sedan with a taxi sign stuck in the window. "It may not be much on the outside," Pauli said, stashing the luggage, "but you ought to see the engine." He slammed the trunk lid down and got in behind the wheel. "Where to?"

Alcott gave him the name of his hotel, and with a great clashing of gears Pauli lurched out into traffic.

"What was that you said about the engine?"

Pauli grinned. "So I exaggerated. I didn't want you to think I was completely down on my luck—not an old friend of Groot's."

"Are you? Down on your luck?"

"Naw. I make out. Not as good as I did with Groot, but okay."

"How come you left him, then?"

"Groot?" Pauli's eyes widened. "I'm sorry. I thought you knew. Groot's dead. Keeled over on the *Koningen Juliana* coming in from Harwich just about two years ago now. Heart or something. Anyway, when they went to examine him, they found almost fifty thousand English pounds stashed in the lining of his overcoat. Caused one hell of a flap—not least of all for the poor sod who was trying to evade the Brits' currency laws by having Groot smuggle it out for him." He shook his head. "Things haven't been the same since—although, to look on the bright side, I guess that makes you number one now, with no exceptions."

Alcott shook his head. "Afraid not," he said.

"Aw, come on. Who else?"

"Somebody," Alcott said. "Anybody. I've retired. I'm out of the business for good."

"Yeah?" Pauli said. His eyes flicked up to the rearview mirror. "Maybe you ought to tell that to the guys following us, then."

Alcott started.

"No, don't look around," Pauli said. "You wouldn't see anything. But there's a little blue Saab that's been on our tail ever since we left the airport. You want me to lose it?"

Alcott settled back on the seat. Pauli was right. He wouldn't see anything that meant anything anyway. "What for?" he said.

Pauli looked at him curiously, then nodded. "Yeah, you're right,"

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he said. "You're only going back to your hotel, and they could find that out by checking registrations. So why let them know you spotted them? Make 'em all the easier to lose later when you really want to.

"You know," he went on a moment later, "when that time comes, it might not be a bad idea to have a driver handy you knew you could depend on. You know what I mean?"

Alcott smiled. "You volunteering, Pauli?" he said.

"Well, why not?" said Pauli. "I may have exaggerated about the engine, but this crate can move when it has to, and I still know a trick or two that'll do the job when speed won't. I'd give you a good price, too. Call it an all-day charter."

Alcott continued to smile. "Thanks, Pauli," he said, "but no thanks. I meant it when I said I was retired."

Pauli shrugged. "Sure," he said, "whatever you say." Later, though, as he unloaded Alcott's luggage at the hotel, he handed the American a grimy business card. It identified Paul Ostermann as an Export Specialist.

"The card's a little outdated," Pauli said with a wry smile, "but the telephone's still good. You can reach me there just about any time—in case you change your mind about the all-day deal."

"Sure," Alcott said.

Alcott's bags were brought up to his room by a uniformed fifteen-year-old who was probably the manager's son or nephew learning the business from the ground up, but Alcott tipped him more generously than he needed, anyway. After the boy had gone, he picked up the phone and asked the operator for an outside line.

"If you'll give me the number, sir," the woman said, "I'll place it for you."

Alcott hesitated. "No," he said, "I'll take care of it later." He put the phone down and sat for a long time, frowning thoughtfully. Finally he got up and left the room.

Outside, the city seemed to sparkle in the late-afternoon sun and the bicyclists were out in force, great fleets of them swooping around and through the more restrained vehicular traffic. But if Alcott had any thoughts of joining them, he was forestalled by Pauli's battered cab parked halfway back along the curved drive that led to the hotel.

Pauli got out, grinning shamefacedly as Alcott approached. "I thought I'd stick around in case you came out again," he said, "just

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to show you how dependable I can be." He shrugged. "What the hell, business isn't all that good, anyway."

"That's too bad," Alcott said. "But whatever the reason, I'm glad you did stay, because I've decided to take you up on that all-day charter."

"Great!" Pauli said. He opened the passenger door with a flourish. "Where to, boss?"

"A restaurant, to start."

"Continental, Chinese, or Indonesian?"

Alcott considered. "Chinese," he said. "I've had enough Continental to last me a while."

Van der Myde leaned back in his chair and regarded the man standing opposite him in front of the big desk. "Well?" he said. It was much later that same evening and through the windows behind him the airport lay dark and deserted.

The man shrugged. "About what you'd expect," he said. "He went straight from here to his hotel, then to a restaurant for an early dinner, and then back to the hotel and in for the night."

"He didn't meet anyone?"

The man shook his head. "No. He did use the phone, though. In the restaurant."

Van der Myde raised his eyebrows. "Not in the hotel," he said. "Interesting."

"Yes. I thought so, too. There was no way I could tell who he was calling, though, short of going inside and sticking my ear up next to his."

"It doesn't matter," van der Myde said. "We'll find out soon enough."

"You bet we will," Pauli agreed.

Alcott had said he would need the car sometime around nine the following morning but, at van der Myde's insistence, Pauli had been waiting since before eight. A good thing, too, since it was twenty of the hour when Alcott came out. Pauli started his engine as soon as he saw him and pulled up at the curb almost before the big hotel door swung shut behind the American.

"You're early," Alcott said.

Pauli grinned. "I told you I was dependable. You're ready, I'm ready. So where's it to be today?"

Alcott sat back on his seat and told him . . .

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"Where?" van der Myde said. There were three of them in the small office, van der Myde, Pauli, and Triemstra, the blond officer who had first accosted Alcott.

Pauli shifted uneasily.

"Like I told you," he said, "Rembrandthuis. We spent a lot of time there, and all the other usual tourist spots, too—the old church, the palace. You know. Tomorrow we do the Rijksmuseum and Stedelijk."

Triemstra snorted. "Why this sudden interest in art?" he said. "He isn't planning some kind of Topkapi-type heist, is he?"

"Not if past performance is any indicator," van der Myde said. "Although I wouldn't put it past him to try to smuggle out the results of someone else's theft. Or he could just be leading us a merry chase. Sooner or later, though, he'll have to make his move, and when he does we'll be there. Won't we, Pauli?"

"Yes, sir," Pauli said.

By late the following afternoon, though, he was beginning to wonder, because it was becoming more and more apparent that Alcott's move—if indeed there was going to be one—was going to come later rather than sooner. Not only did the American ignore, or fail to recognize, the increasingly unsubtle hints he dropped that he, Pauli, was, you know, "available" for more demanding duties any time they were required, but he plodded through the myriad rooms of the Rijksmuseum, admiring the Vermeers and Rembrandts, and then later the Klees, Picassos, and Rauschenbergs of the Stedelijk with a determination that would have put the most dogged tourist to shame. He even seemed to be enjoying himself and said as much when Pauli, worn down and discouraged, finally dropped him back at his hotel.

"You know, Pauli, I've been in and out of this city a dozen times at least and I've never been to the places we've been before today. I just wish— No, no point to it. All good things have to end sometime and so does this."

"Back to business?" Pauli said, perking up.

"I have to make a living somehow," Alcott said, "like everybody else. Your last job'll be to drive me out to Schipol tomorrow. Figure out the bill. I'll pay you then."

"Sure," Pauli said. "But you'll want me later on tonight, too, won't you?"

Alcott shook his head. "No. It's been a long day and I still have to pack. So I'll probably just eat here at the hotel and turn in early.

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There is one thing you can do for me, though. I need to pick up some souvenirs for my father-in-law. See if you can't find me a couple of bottles of gin. You know, the kind that comes in those stone jugs. And a box of cigars—hand-rolled Havanas. Coronas. I think those are the long, fat ones. The clerk'll know."

"Any particular tobacconist or store?"

"No, you know the city better than I do," Alcott said. "Just pick out a good one."

Pauli shrugged. One last hope down the drain. "Sure," he said. "I'll have them for you tomorrow when I pick you up for the airport."

"If you don't mind," Alcott said, "I'd like to have them now—so I can pack them with the rest of my stuff. You can just leave them at the desk. The boy'll bring them up."

Pauli hesitated.

"What's the matter?" Alcott said. "If it's too much bother—"

"Oh, no," Pauli said. "No bother." He put the car in gear.

Smiling, Alcott watched him drive off until he was out of sight. Then, instead of going into the hotel as Pauli might have expected, he set off briskly down the street, humming happily to himself. Two blocks from the building, he hailed a passing cab.

Pauli wasn't as prompt the next morning as he had been, but he still got Alcott to the airport in plenty of time. Van der Myde and Triemstra were waiting for him at the KLM counter.

"Really, Inspector," Alcott said, "this is becoming annoying."

"Perhaps," van der Myde said. "But unavoidable." He motioned for Alcott to precede them, and, sighing, the American accompanied the two Customs officers back to van der Myde's office, where once again his luggage was placed on the low table and once again van der Myde asked him to open it.

"You're wasting your time," Alcott said. "All you'll find that wasn't there when you looked before is a box of cigars and two stone jars of Holland gin."

"Shall we?" van der Myde said. "In that case I wonder why you found it necessary to add to your luggage. That suitcase, for example. You didn't have it with you when you came into this country. Did you?"

"You're the one with the good memory," Alcott said. "You tell me."

Van der Myde shook his head. "Memory has nothing to do with it, Mr. Alcott," he said. "The simple fact is you were followed. That

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surprises you, doesn't it? Not, of course, that you weren't aware that given the circumstances of your arrival we were hardly likely to leave your movements entirely unchecked. That's the problem with standard procedures. The people subject to them get to know them—just as the people subject to your prior exploits got to know you. So just as you tried to deceive us as to your intentions, we set up our own, shall we say, smokescreen to deceive you as to ours. We put a check on your movements—Pauli, a cheerful fool only an idiot would fail to recognize as a *provocateur*. And you did just what we hoped, Mr. Alcott. When you ditched Pauli, you failed to look behind you for the real, the true check on your movements.

"Shall I tell you where you went after you sent Pauli on his fool's errand yesterday?"

"It's not necessary," Alcott said.

"For the record then," van der Myde said, "and perhaps my own satisfaction. You left your hotel and proceeded directly to a small Chinese restaurant—not the one where you had eaten earlier and not a very good one, either, for that matter. However, I doubt it was for the food that you went, because you emerged not ten minutes later carrying, unless I'm very much mistaken, the very suitcase Inspector Triemstra is presently examining."

Triemstra nodded. "The inner and outer dimensions don't match," he said. "There's a hidden panel."

Van der Myde smiled at Alcott. "Will you open it," he said, "or do we tear it apart?"

"I'll open it," Alcott said. He released the hidden catches inside the suitcase and lifted out the panel to reveal an unframed drawing of a seated woman fitted snugly into the space beneath. She had been drawn face-on but the whole presentation was highly stylized and her features in fact appeared to have been drawn both full face and in profile.

"Well," van der Myde said, "it appears there is something new, after all. Picasso, isn't it?"

Alcott nodded. "Before we go any further, though, Inspector," he said, "perhaps I should remind you that works of art are not subject to Customs duties. And it's illegal to take art *out* of a country only if it's a national treasure. This would hardly come under that classification. Not in the Netherlands, anyway."

"There are Picassos at the Stedelijk," Triemstra said.

"But not this one," Alcott said. "You can check. In any case, it's not an original. It's a copy and I have a bill of sale to prove it."

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"Would you care to explain then why you chose to carry it concealed?" van der Myde said.

"Frankly, Inspector, unless you have evidence of a crime I don't see where it's any of your business *how* I chose to carry it. But since we're all speaking for the record, I'll tell you. The original is presently hanging in my office in Houston. It's quite a conversation piece, as you might imagine, but with the current inflation-recession squeeze in the U.S., it's become a luxury I can no longer afford. The trouble is, it was a wedding present from my father-in-law and it would break the old man's heart if we sold it. That's why I had the copy made—to replace the original after we sell it."

"And your sole concern is to spare your father-in-law's feelings," van der Myde said drily.

Alcott shook his head. "I'll be frank," he said. "That's a large part of it, but it wouldn't help my stock values for word to get around that I was selling assets. Preventing that isn't illegal, though."

"Perhaps not," van der Myde said slowly, "but I'm impounding the drawing just the same."

"You have no right—"

Van der Myde held up his hand. "No? Would you care to contest me in court? I'm sure we could arrange a hearing before a magistrate in five or six weeks—or so."

Alcott's mouth compressed into a bitter line. Finally he turned to Triemstra. "Are you done with me?" he said.

Triemstra glanced at van der Myde, then nodded. Alcott began angrily refastening his suitcases. "I'll expect that drawing to be forwarded to me as soon as your investigation is completed," he said. "At your expense."

"Perhaps," van der Myde said.

After the American had gone, Triemstra stood watching his superior solemnly. Finally he said: "All I can do is repeat what I said before—he was lying."

Van der Myde shrugged. "Not so we could prove," he said. "Alcott's too old a hand to have told that detailed a story unless he knew in advance that every jot and tittle would prove out. But there's *something* wrong with that drawing, I know it. And he was afraid I'd find out. That's why he didn't protest more than he did." He looked out the window as Alcott's plane lumbered toward the runway and takeoff.

"This time I guess I'll just have to be satisfied with spoiling his plan—whatever it was . . ."

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If he could have seen Alcott, though, he might have felt differently, because none of the bitterness and anger the American had displayed earlier was apparent in his manner now. And once the plane was airborne, he sat quietly in his seat, working out costs and expenses on his pocket calculator. After a while he became aware of the man next to him watching him curiously.

"Dandy little gadgets," the man said. He was a stocky, knobby-faced American. He held an unlighted cigar in his left hand and he gestured with it now in the direction of Alcott's calculator. "I don't think I've ever seen one quite that small before, though."

Alcott shook his head. "This isn't anything," he said. "My company manufactures them. If we wanted, we could make one as small as your thumbnail."

"That'd work? You're kidding me."

"No."

"How'd you fit all the wiring in?"

"There isn't any," Alcott said. "Not much, anyway. All the circuits are on silicon chips."

"You don't say. Small, are they?"

"Tiny," Alcott said. He smiled, remembering the box of cigars now stored safely in the hold with the rest of his baggage. It had been a simple matter to dump out the ones Pauli had bought and substitute those he'd brought back in the suitcase with the fake Picasso. "You'd be surprised how many you could stuff into that cigar if you put your mind to it."

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What do readers want in a mystery story? A crime central to the plot, certainly. And never underestimate the appeal of deeply felt, clearly expressed emotion, even if it's murderous rage . . .

THE BREAKING

by SUE SUSSMAN

It was the fence, of course. That's what I wanted to tell you. You being appointed Joe's psychiatrist and all. I'll go on up to visit him in a minute, but first I wanted to tell you about the fence.

I knew it was trouble from the minute I laid eyes on it. Not at all a proper fence for Greenbrier Avenue. It's not like we was still living on Franklin Street. Houses on Greenbrier Avenue want thick black-wrought iron set in concrete pillars. I told Joe that the day we moved in. I don't recollect that he answered, but then even in the best of times Joe's not much of a talker.

Anyhow, the next day Joe surprised me with two tickets—one for me and one for my very dearest friend, Amy Sue Beckett—for one week at the Costa. That's a spa in California. Costs a penny, I can tell you. It wasn't like Joe to part company with greenback dollars that way, especially since he can't abide Amy Sue, but I just figured he didn't want me going alone and he's so skinny and delicate a spa would be wasted on him. I thought the tickets were his way of saying he appreciated all the hard work I'd been doing. It's not easy finding a house and furnishing it and— But I'm not here to tell you *my* troubles.

When I came back, there it was—a picket fence. A *white*-picket fence! What I still can't figure is how Joe got it arranged for and finished before I got home. I swear that man can't get dressed unless I lay his clothes out for him. Maybe if he ever starts talkin' to you, or to anyone for that matter, you might want to find that out.

Anyhow, I started to say something to him about the fence but he got this look in his eyes like my brother Crawford used to get when we was kids and I'd teased him a mite too much. Besides, I figured I could change the fence in a couple of years. Which shows how I

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didn't understand about that fence at all. I wouldn't change it just now if my life depended on it— Oh, I didn't mean anything by that. Just a figure of speech. Of course, if the judge is going to be putting Joe away—

I almost forgot. Take a look at this. I found it yesterday, tucked up into the pages of Joe's will. From the way that picture's worn along the creases, I'd say he carried it in his wallet for some time. Heaven knows what magazine he cut it out of. See the date down on the bottom? February 1954. Of course, that little bitty cottage is nothing like our house. But that fence, that white-picket fence twined with clematis, that's *exactly* the fence Joe put up. Now, maybe when he was twenty and dirt-poor that cottage seemed grand to him. But I can't figure why he's kept that old picture, seeing as how he's bettered that house considerably.

I'll never, as long as I draw breath, forget the day that first picket went. We'd been in the house just under a month. Every morning Joe would go out, walk around his fence, kinda checking it out—for what I couldn't say—then he'd pick up the paper and come in. On this particular day, Joe'd no more than stepped out the door than I heard this—oh, I don't know—animal sound, you might call it. I'd heard a sound like it once before—at the beach. A little boy had drowned and his mama was rocking his body in her arms, and that sound was coming up out of her.

The picket was broken right in half. It was still nailed top and bottom to the cross posts and the two broken pieces poked into the yard. I got Joe into the house and calmed him down some and told him it was probably a defective piece of wood that had just given way. I told him I'd call the fence man that very morning and have it fixed. He snapped at me—started yelling about how *he'd* take care of *his* fence. How I should at least let him have *his* fence.

I can't recollect Joe ever being that agitated about anything. He's talked as calmly as you please on how his parents beat him when they were drunk, which was near every day until they died. And he told me how his kids mimicked that little stammer of his in front of their friends when they thought he wasn't listening. Joe's even described how his first wife jawed at him in public on a regular basis before her untimely death. But I don't think any of that touched him near as much as seeing that first picket snapped in half.

The second one went a week to the day later. Joe came banging back inside the house without the newspaper. He pulled a chair to the kitchen window, drew the curtain nearly shut, and waited. I

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asked him what he was intending. He said he'd been expecting something like this. *They* didn't want him to have anything of his own. I asked him who he was talking about but he was done talking.

I knew the set of his body. It was the exact rod-stiff way he sat the day I first met him. I was a receptionist at Life Line Insurance. The company wouldn't pay him his wife's insurance, said there were questions about her death that needed clearing up. Every day Joe came and sat from the time we opened till we closed.

My friend in Claims told me Joe'd been sitting in his driveway in a '76 station wagon waiting on his wife. When she came out and walked around back, the car jumped into reverse. She died instantly. It seemed peculiar to my company that the half-million-dollar policy on Joe's wife was less than a month old. Seeing as how Joe wasn't well off to begin with, the company was doing some serious digging into Joe's life. After a couple of weeks of spending eight-hour days together, Joe started talking to me every now and then. My friend in Claims said Joe's wife had been what you might call a shrew. I determined to be as nice to him as I knew how.

It was that article I saw in *The Wall Street Journal* about a make of '76 station wagons slipping into reverse all on their own that finally ended things. I brought the article right over to Joe's house, and sure enough it was the same model he'd been driving. He was grateful, I can tell you. We married a little after the claim was paid. That money plus what he got in his suit against the car manufacturer made Joe what you might call an overnight millionaire. Funny how you forget the little details, like how Joe sat the way he did in the insurance-company office. But I knew as soon as he settled into that kitchen chair he wasn't going to move till he was ready.

Joe sat at the window all night and never moved far from the kitchen during the day. The sight of the broken picket pieces dangling from the fence seemed to gnaw at him so I pulled them off and set them near the back door. The next night he was at the window again and didn't take notice when I said good night.

About the fourth night, I was two rooms away talking to Amy Sue on the phone and she said something that caught me as funny. Later, when I walked into the kitchen, Joe made kind of that long low sound a dog makes before it barks. He growled something about my making fun of him behind his back just like the rest of them. I wanted to get a snack from the refrigerator but he wouldn't allow light in the kitchen, in case *they* saw it.

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They came on the seventh day. There were two of them—each six foot plus. The police told me later they were neighbor boys who passed our house on the way home from a weekly karaté class. When Joe's fence went up with all its nice neat pickets, it proved too tempting for them. "Attractive nuisance," I think the police called it. The first week, one boy karaté-kicked a picket. The second week the other boy did the kicking.

The third week—the week Joe was waiting for them—they'd decided to see who could kick in five pickets the fastest. The Martin boy—the one who survived—said they never knew what hit them. There was no warning. They'd no sooner started kicking in the pickets than Joe came flying out of the house. He grabbed one of the broken pickets near the back door and clutched it in both hands over his head. He was screaming something at them, the boy said, but he couldn't say what.

Joe reached the Staller boy first. He couldn't have come up to that boy's shoulder but he still managed to bring the board down, nails and all, square on the boy's head. The Martin boy says he ran halfway down the block in shock before he realized his friend needed him. When he ran back, Joe was still working on the Staller boy. The police think that first blow was the killer, but Joe didn't stop.

The Martin boy jumped on Joe and brought him down to the ground.

You've got to remember Joe's size. No one seems able to explain how Joe bested the Martin boy. They say it's like those mothers who lift cars to save their babies under the wheels. Only the police can't figure what Joe could have been trying to save.

It was the Martin boy's screams that woke me. I called the police before I did anything. I didn't know what was going on out there, but I wasn't about to have a look-see without knowing the police were on their way.

Whatever fury had driven Joe was gone by the time I got to him. The Martin boy was unconscious. Joe, covered with blood, was standing at his fence, holding the broken picket pieces, trying to figure which went where.

I'm going upstairs now. I'm having lunch with Amy Sue and I don't want to be late. I know Joe won't talk to me, but I feel like I should at least pop in. I'd so appreciate your keeping in touch with me on what's going to happen. I don't mean to be pushy, but life must go on. And I do think a New Orleans acorn-and-oak-leaf wrought-iron fence would be just the thing around my house.

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a *NEW* short story by

WILLIAM BANKIER

Sherman Metcalfe, former first trombone with the Montreal Symphony, and his wife Libby, formerly of the corps de ballet. Like everything this easygoing couple tried, every leap without a preparatory look, their exodus to a farm in Connecticut worked perfectly.

Less successful, however, was their impulsive drop-in visit to their friends Zoe and Adrian in London—bearing gifts, of course—and their subsequent, gratuitous invasion of the literary scene . . .

DEAD WOMEN SELL NO TALES

by WILLIAM BANKIER

It was a plain galvanized-iron garden incinerator, blackened from frequent use. The lid lay beside it in a patch of tall grass. Inside, mixed with the ash from ancient fires, could be seen a charred fragment of paisley fabric and the heel of a woman's shoe.

"Come and look at this," Metcalfe said. He remained poised as if fascinated by a cobra in a basket.

Libby walked across the ground from the back door of the cottage where she had been trying to peer past the curtains into the kitchen. She joined her husband at the incinerator. "Good Lord."

"Isn't that the dress Mavis Hanniford was wearing the other day?"

"Yes, and that heel is from the shoes she had on. I remember the grey leather."

"He's killed her, then." Metcalfe began walking toward the lane-

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way where the car was parked. Libby followed him, picking her steps over rough ground.

"I can believe it," she agreed. "After we fed him the champagne, it all came out. He spoke of her as if he hated her guts."

Metcalfe opened the door and held it while Libby got into the car. She slammed it shut as he went to the driver's side and climbed in. After days in this rented vehicle, he was still not accustomed to driving in England—everything was on the wrong side. He switched on. "Let's go and see if they have such a thing as a policeman in the village."

When Sherman Metcalfe married Libby Digby, it was done without ceremony and within a week of their meeting at a rehearsal in Place des Arts of the annual Christmas performance of *Nutcracker* by Les Grands Ballets Canadiens accompanied by the Montreal Symphony Orchestra. Metcalfe was first trombone with the MSO. Libby danced in the corps de ballet.

Metcalfe played the trombone so effortlessly and so well that his main problem was boredom. His antidote to the ennui was a boyish sense of humor. During rehearsals, when he was not required to play, he would whisper down his instrument the name of a clarinetist in the row ahead—"Beloooooose!" Sometimes Ivan Belouse could play on, other times he would crack up. The house conductor tolerated a certain amount of this tomfoolery, but guests like Mehta or von Karajan took umbrage.

A public scolding from the chef d'orchestre was a contributing factor in the Metcalfes' decision to leave not just the MSO, not just Montreal, but Canada itself for a farm in Connecticut, where they took up the country life. Another reason was Libby's left knee. Ballet is the most physical of the arts, just this side of pro football, and the willowy blonde was spending a good deal of time on the sidelines, her damaged joint strapped and injected with cortisone.

Finally, there was the fact that Sherman Metcalfe was an American citizen, born forty-one years ago in Aspen, Colorado. So he was free to return to the U.S. of A. with his Canadian wife, his collection of trombones, and a desire to turn their lives upside down and see what could be shaken out.

Like everything Sherman and Libby tried, every leap without a preparatory look, their exodus to the farm worked perfectly. Libby was a born cook and jam-maker, so within weeks she had her herb garden under cultivation, was boiling maple syrup using sap from

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the trees behind the house, and was turning out hickory-nut cookies in such profusion the surplus had to be sold through a shop in the town down the road.

Metcalfe discovered he liked to fell dead elms and that he was good at dragging rocks into position to form a dry-stone wall. He acquired a cow and milked it, looking, as Libby said when she observed him on a three-legged stool, knees spread, sparse hair falling over his ruddy face, like Old Macdonald.

This is not to suggest that the Metcalfes abandoned music. Neither hid their talent under a bushel, and within a year both were giving lessons to young trombonists and dancers in three neighboring towns. So the sudden move to the States, like the spontaneous decision to marry nine years ago, was a great success. The Metcalfes, going off half cocked once more, had hit the target, as usual, dead center.

It was on a morning in spring, having slept late after a party at their neighbor Gilbert Brewer's farm, that Libby came up with the sort of suggestion calculated to put a smile on her husband's face. "What say we dart across to England and drop in on Adrian and Zoe?"

Metcalfe swabbed a golden smear of egg from his plate with a wedge of wholewheat toast. "Show up at their door," he furthered the scenario, "with a couple of bottles of champagne. Just came by to toast the new baby."

"Zoe will plotz."

In order not to delay things interminably, Metcalfe reached for the telephone and dialed their travel agent. When the arrangements were set, he put down the phone and said: "I know what put England into your mind. It was Gilbert Brewer talking about that English author he's added to his list."

"Didn't he go on about her?"

"Can't blame him, I suppose. Poor old Gilbert, he's suffering like a lot of publishers these days. He could go to the wall. But this woman may save him."

"I've never heard of her."

"Nor have I. She doesn't write the sort of thing we read. Turns out dozens of romantic novels. Housewives buy them like boxes of detergent—literally—in the supermarket."

Libby turned three times gracefully on one toe. "London in springtime. Do you suppose the British Museum has lost its charm?"

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"No way. They keep it locked in a case with a guard watching it."

Enjoying drinks and conversation with strangers and efficient little naps all the way across the Atlantic, the Metcalfes arrived at Heathrow fresher than when they left New York. Their room at the posh hotel on Park Lane was just what they wanted. "Bliss!" Libby called from the bathroom. "A heated towel rail."

Metcalfe was waiting for room service to come on the line, gazing through the window at the green acres of Hyde Park. "We're in London," he said and went on to order a meal.

After eating, they packed the champagne in a blue-suede holdall and set out on foot through Knightsbridge and into Chelsea, following a street map in their A-to-Z tourist guide. Libby pointed to the letters on the cover. "Adrian and Zoe," she said triumphantly.

The Metcalfes had never been to the little townhouse before but had written many a letter to this address. Standing now within sight of the blue door, inspecting the wrought-iron gate, the tidy brick façade, the doll's-house windows surmounting boxes of begonias and ivy, they experienced a wave of envy. Nor were they afraid to confess it.

"Zoe comes home here every night," Libby moaned. "I'm not sure I can bear it."

"And the Grenadier is fifty yards away," Metcalfe said, indicating the pub on the corner. He opened the gate—it made a sound from another century—and they approached the brass knocker which was shaped like the head of a lion.

Adrian and Zoe were advertising people, she a copywriter, he an art director. They were a team. They had arrived in Montreal several years ago, sent out to the colonies by the London branch of the multinational agency that employed them. Their brief, originally, was to rescue an important tobacco account that was shaky. This done, they were asked to stay on because they fitted in well and other accounts could benefit from their touch.

Zoe and Adrian liked the restaurants in Montreal and enjoyed being treated as experts from the land of Carnaby Street and the Beatles, so they accepted a substantial raise in salary, worked only on the plum accounts, and brushed up their French against a possible future assignment in Europe. Sherman Metcalfe had met them when they attended a symphony-orchestra rehearsal. The wife of the agency president was chairperson on the MSO committee, so the best agency team was assigned to prepare an advertising campaign

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for the new subscription drive. During a break, Metcalfe began playing the Stan Kenton version of "Peanut Vendor" on his trombone. This captivated Adrian. They talked at the end of the afternoon, went for drinks, and ended up back at the Metcalfe house, listening to pirated Armed Forces Broadcasting Service transcriptions of Benny Goodman at Carnegie Hall.

And now Sherman and Libby were standing on a front step in Chelsea, waiting for A or Z to open the door. But the person who responded to their knocking turned out to be a gangling young man in stovepipe jeans and a sheepskin vest. His eyes were lidded top and bottom and his hair was cut to within a millimeter of his domed scalp.

"They've gone to Singapore," he explained to the visitors. He invited them in and all three remained standing in the cork-paneled vestibule as if chairs had not been invented. "Doing some work for the agency's new Asian office. I've been left in charge of the house. I write a fashion column."

"They took the baby?" Libby said, exhibiting her disbelief. The child, by her calculations, could be no older than eleven months.

"Everywhere," confirmed the saturnine journalist. "For the last six months, she's been pedaling it through London traffic on the back of her bike."

This display of paternal sanity elevated the youth in the estimation of the Metcalfes. But they refused his invitation to take coffee and adjourned down the road through gathering darkness to the beery snug of the Grenadier. Over pints of brown ale, Metcalfe appraised the situation.

"It could be worse. We aren't in Philadelphia. Or Manchester, or even Baytown." This last location was the small Ontario town from which Libby Digby had come many years ago to make her fortune in Montreal. "We're in London. Let's go back to the hotel and drink our champagne. Then let's relax for a few days here where Shakespeare shook and Pepys did most of his peeping."

"And so to bed," Libby agreed, downing the rest of her pint.

They spent enchanted mornings, afternoons, and evenings, mostly on foot, roaming the dissimilar neighborhoods that form the west end of metro London. They identified at least thirty residences the ownership of which they would have killed to secure. They kept turning corners into astonishing squares, and there was always another public house in the distance—the Australian, the Admiral

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Codrington, the Elephant and Castle—each with its plates of giant sausages and casseroles of shepherd's pie, and no two places remotely the same.

They drifted through acres of parkland within a mile of their hotel, not just Hyde Park and the adjoining Kensington Gardens, but Green Park on the way to Buckingham Palace and, beyond, the lagoon-laced St. James's Park, with squadrons of geese practicing landings and two bald pelicans tottering drunkenly on a perpetual promenade along the banks.

One day at noon they caught the Irish Guards in the process of being changed in front of the Palace. There was something comic about the woolly wolfhound being led in his ceremonial position at the head of the parade. But it was another thing entirely when a platoon of guards split off and marched from the north gate and along The Mall toward their barracks behind a fife-and-drum band playing "The Wearin' of the Green." As he heard the bar-room song rendered under the open sky in this battlefield version, Metcalfe said: "Listen, Libby—this is what the fighting is all about."

It was on the third day and they were eating curry in The Star of India on the Old Brompton Road when Libby said: "Here's what we should do."

"What?"

"Go and see what's-her-name. Gilbert Brewer's new author."

"Mavis Hanniford?"

"You're incredible. I've been trying to remember her name since we got here."

"The great Sherm hears all, knows all. The lady lives in a seaside town in Kent by the name of Twinchurch."

"Are you sure?"

"Absolutely," Metcalfe said. "Gilbert talked about her so much, how could I forget?"

The publisher had, indeed, waxed eloquent on the subject of the English novelist. Her romantic adventures were going to save his firm from bankruptcy, permitting him to go on paying advances to worthwhile writers whose work few people wanted to buy.

"She's a recluse, I understand," Brewer had said. "Nobody sees Mavis Hanniford, not even her English publisher. Everything happens by mail. Twinchurch, they tell me, is no more than a bend in the road."

Across the remains of his Indian meal, Metcalfe said: "How do we get to Twinchurch? Take a train to somewhere and then a taxi?"

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"Where's your sense of adventure?" his wife reprimanded him. "Let's hire a car."

At ten-thirty the next morning, Metcalfe sat with his Colorado legs bent under the steering wheel of a compact box on wheels. He was on the wrong side of the car, on the wrong side of the road, with the gear shift in his wrong hand, driving down Park Lane into the tail end of rush-hour traffic. And he knew not where he was going.

"Thanks very much for all this," he said.

"I'm glad I don't have to look," Libby muttered. She had her head down over the map of London and Kent spread across her knees. "I'm the navigator."

Somehow they made it across Vauxhall Bridge, down the Camberwell Road, and through several of the primitive rings the English call roundabouts, emerging at last onto what appeared to be a highway heading south and east. "This is good," Libby said. "Keep on like this and we'll arrive at Ramsgate. Twinchurch is less than a fingernail from Ramsgate."

"Which finger?" Metcalfe asked in a voice that discouraged any response.

As they approached Ramsgate, Metcalfe was beginning to enjoy himself. "By the time I get to Twinchurch," he sang in a melancholy falsetto, "she'll be waiting."

"With the drawbridge up if Gilbert Brewer told the truth. How will we get in?"

"Our imported champagne should do the trick. You were right not to let us drink it the other night. Better calling-card hath no man than a couple of magna of Hammondsport champers."

Ramsgate looked an attractive place. Seeking the road to Twinchurch, Metcalfe cruised through town, saw Georgian squares lined with sober buildings, flaky as the powdered face of a retired actress. The seafront was a generous curve of pubs, fish restaurants, and arcades with an atmosphere out of a Graham Greene novel. Yachts bobbed in the harbor, and as the little car left town a bloated hovercraft moved from behind a headland and thundered across the water towards Calais—not Greene this time, but H. G. Wells.

The drive to Twinchurch was less than five miles through countryside that became increasingly rural. Tall poles erected to carry hop vines in season stood naked in field after field until the road sank below ground level and they drove down a narrow tunnel roofed

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with trees, the afternoon light emerald-green. Metcalfe braked and they proceeded slowly, drugged by the beauty of their surroundings like the space traveler flashing along shafts of time in Kubrick's *Space Odyssey*.

The road emerged onto a flat promontory, with the grey-ruled line between sea and sky on the left and, on the right, beyond a mass of copper beech-trees, a square spire and a pointed one, both of flinty stone and centuries old. Twinchurch!

Metcalfe drove past the trees and found the town to be what Gilbert Brewer had predicted—a bend in the road. There was one shop, closed; one pub, not yet open; a few cottages flush with the road; and the churches set back a quarter of a mile on individual rises of ground surrounded by a toothy border of gravestones.

They sat with the motor idling. Nothing moved—no people, no animals, no other cars. "I wouldn't like to be here when the coffins start opening in those church basements," Metcalfe said.

Libby glanced apprehensively at the sky. "It's getting late," she said. "There's noplace to stay here and it's the wrong time to start knocking on doors asking for Mavis Recluse."

"You're right. Let's go back to Ramsgate and find a room."

They found a room at the Avalon Bed and Breakfast. Its floor, covered with fragrant new linoleum, sloped from door to window. "Home away from home," said Libby, who had grown up in just such a room in the old duplex back in Baytown.

Metcalfe switched on the electric fire against a clammy presence of the sea. An aroma of scorched dust emanated from the dull red coils. Outside, gulls screamed over the pickings from a fish-and-chip shop. "Let's not stay here and go crazy," he said. "Let's find a place to eat."

The decision as to where to go was taken out of their hands. When they came downstairs, the landlord drew back two chairs from a table by the dining-room window and the Metcalfes sat down. A slope-shouldered girl ran from the kitchen with two bowls of soup. The landlord flipped back the napkin covering a basket of bread and the meal was on.

Warm plates arrived, covered with slabs of lamb and heaped with roast potatoes and buttered sprouts. Dessert was rhubarb crumble drowned in hot custard. Wine? The retired major crept behind his bar and produced a bottle of very good beaujolais. Near the end of the feast, Metcalfe felt encouraged to ask: "We're looking for an

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author named Mavis Hanniford. She's famous in England and soon will be in America. We know she lives in Twinchurch but we don't know where exactly. Could you advise us on how to go about approaching the lady?"

"Never heard of her," the old soldier said and he began cranking out the Metcalfes' bill on an adding machine.

In the late morning, they drove again to Twinchurch. Even at midday, the town was not much more alive. On his second pass down the main road, Metcalfe saw a lady leaving one of the cottages and he slowed down. She appeared determined, as the car approached her, to go back inside.

"Excuse me. We're looking for Mavis Hanniford. I understand she lives here."

The woman was solid under tweed coat and matching hat—eyeglasses level, every button tightly sewn, her childish face shy but determined. When Henry V called "Once more unto the breach," he wanted people like this to come running. Having taken her time assessing the strangers, the woman asked: "Do you know Mavis Hanniford?"

"Not yet. We've come to meet her."

"She doesn't like having visitors."

"She'll like us, I guarantee it. We come as admirers."

"Without an invitation, I'm not sure—"

Libby leaned across. "It's all right. Her American publisher asked us to deliver a message. Miss Hanniford will be happy to hear from him."

"Well—" The lady's face conveyed her reluctance. It was as if a couple of Vikings were asking permission to burn just one of her churches.

"Is it one of these houses?" Metcalfe prompted her.

"No. Hers is the cottage past the headland. Green and white. The only one there."

It meant driving back through the village. The pub was open, so they stopped and went in for a drink to restore their initiative. Then they drove a mile or so across the promontory until they saw a white cottage with green shutters on an island of grass amid a sea of chalky, flinty soil. As Metcalfe wheeled into the head of the laneway beside the cottage, Libby said: "I feel as if I'm going ashore on D-Day."

A gravel path with two eccentric turns in it led them to the front

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entrance. The door stood open, offering a view into a hallway crowded with oak furniture. Before either of them could find the knocker, a man appeared from the front room.

"I saw you park in my laneway." It was more of an accusation than a greeting. He was a rotund fellow with a florid face and wild grey hair.

"Sorry about that," Metcalfe said. "We're looking for Mavis Hanniford. We've come from Gilbert Brewer, her new publisher in the U.S.A."

"Bearing gifts," Libby added, opening her holdall to reveal the necks of two champagne bottles.

The sight of the foil-wrapped corks had a soothing effect on the man opposing them. He stood to one side. "Come in. Mavis is not here today. But you can speak to me if you like."

He directed them into a room which contained filing cabinets, stacks of reference books, drifts of old newspapers, and a roll-top desk supporting a typewriter.

"How marvelous," Libby crooned. "This is where she works."

"This is where *I* work," the man corrected her. "I, too, am a writer. I'm Mrs. Hanniford's brother. My name is Martin Hope."

After a little encouragement, Hope agreed to have some champagne. While Metcalfe popped a cork, he found two respectable glasses for the visitors. As for himself, he knocked back half an inch of amber liquid from a beaker and extended it for a refill of the bubbly. Metcalfe inhaled the scent of whisky; their host was a solitary morning drinker.

Seated in this cluttered word-factory, the Metcalfes explained the reason for their visit. They happened to be in England; their neighbor at home, publisher Brewer, would be pleased to hear they had contacted his new author, the celebrated Mavis Hanniford. Yes, they knew she treasured her privacy, but the Metcalfes were people who believed friendly contact could never be a mistake. Shyness was a barrier built to be breached.

"Mavis would not agree," Martin Hope said. But he emptied his glass and accepted more of the Upper New York State vintage. "You say you two are friends of a publisher?"

"Neighbors. It was at his party we heard about Mavis."

"I wonder—"

"What?"

"No, it's silly."

"I'm sure it isn't. Wonder what?"

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Hope leaned from his chair and dragged a sheaf of typescript from the desk. "This is my latest work in progress. A novel." He handed the manuscript to Libby.

She read the title page. *Heated Dreams* by Martin Hope. Her heart sank with the weight of the pages. "How marvelous," was all she could think of to say. As she tried to hand the manuscript back, Hope rejected it.

"Keep it. Read it. I'd value your opinion."

Metcalfe noticed his wife's dismay but he also saw an opening. "Yes, we'll both read it and perhaps we can return it when Mavis is at home."

The author's brother chose to ignore the hint. He emptied his glass and this time refilled it himself, draining the first of the two gift bottles. While Metcalfe loosened the second cork, their host grumbled: "Writes trash. Rubbish. Grinds out four thousand words a day. Women gobble it up. Swine—exactly what they deserve."

This burst of rivalry took the Metcalfes by surprise but it made sense. If brother Martin was an aspiring writer, naturally he would resent sister Mavis's disproportionate success. And for all they knew, he was right—neither of them had ever opened the cover of a Mavis Hanniford romance.

Since Hope was becoming wound up on the subject of writing, the visitors were pleased when he asked them to stay for a bite of food. Out came the granary bread, the cheddar cheese, the slab of bacon, and the grill-pan. Hope stood at a counter wielding a set of knives, cutting bread, carving bacon, slicing cheese. Between strokes, he made the steel sing along a carborundum, ensuring the satisfaction of cutting with an edge that was razor-sharp.

The food was delicious, and when the second bottle of champagne was empty, Hope produced tins of light ale. Throughout the meal, he developed his theme of animosity toward his sister. "It's wrong!" His fist emphasized the truth with a resounding thump on the table. "Her stories are froth, nothing more. Oh, she writes well enough. She's facile." The word had an oily sound and his lips showed his distaste as he pronounced it. "But there's no substance. How can a writer be proud of turning out stuff like that?"

"Whereas *your* work—" Libby prompted him.

"My work is original. Not watered down Daphne du Maurier. I write from the heart—the material is deeply felt. And what encouragement do I receive? Damn-all! While the great Mavis Han-

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niford, the celebrated Mavis Hanniford, publishes every mediocre sentence she extrudes."

In the echoing silence following this outburst, Metcalfe said: "I think it's time we shoved off, Libby. Thanks for the food and drink, Mr. Hope."

At the door, Libby received again from their host the manuscript she had left by her chair. "I'll read this and give you my opinion," she said.

"So will I," Metcalfe confirmed. "When can we come back? To return your work, and—" he added "—to meet your sister."

Martin Hope's eyes were on the manuscript. "Tomorrow?" he said as if he wasn't sure.

Then he made an effort of concentration. "Yes, tomorrow. Mavis will be here tomorrow."

Back in Ramsgate, Libby insisted on going into a news agent's shop. "If we're going to meet Mavis Hanniford tomorrow," she said, "we may as well know what we're talking about."

There were no less than five covers on a rack of paperbacks bearing the Hanniford name, each illustrating a glamorous young woman in a different form of danger. Libby chose two at random and paid for them. "Just like buying detergent," she said to her husband, recalling the words of Gilbert Brewer.

After dinner, the Metcalfes retired to their room to do some reading. He began on Hope's manuscript; Libby plunged into *Flight from Wild Waters*. For some time the breathing silence was broken only by the clink of ice cubes floating in tall glasses and the whisper of turning pages. Metcalfe spoke first.

"This is unreadable," he said, tossing aside the manuscript. "Of all the boring, pretentious, wordy rubbish. The man is writing for himself and he must be the only person who would ever bother to plough through it."

Libby seemed to be only half listening. "This is not bad." Her eyes were slightly out of focus. "Not bad at all. The prose is flowery, it's overwritten in places. It could have used some tighter editing. But it's a real adventure. Things happen, one thing after another. Every chapter ends on a cliff-hanger. I like the people, they're real."

"Trade me."

"Later." Libby shielded her book. "When I've finished. The wild Waters in the title turns out to be a man named Xavier Waters. And he certainly *is* wild . . ."

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The Metcalfes killed some time in Ramsgate next day before setting out once again for Twinchurch. They wanted to give Mavis Hanniford time to get back from wherever she had been, to be told by her brother about the visit of the gregarious Americans, and to prepare herself to receive them. With gifts on the back seat—an elaborate fruit basket, a bottle of good sherry, three bottles of wine—they approached the cottage at half past two, having lunched on the way.

This time the front door was closed. Metcalfe knocked twice and Libby once more before they heard the sound of somebody fumbling with more than one lock and then the door was opened.

Mavis Hanniford was a large woman in a paisley dress. Her auburn hair was parted in the middle and drawn tight across her ears to form a bun. Rimless spectacles completed the schoolmarm appearance. Her grey-leather high-heeled sandals revealed toenails painted red.

"Yes," she said before they could speak, nodding her head and beckoning them in. "Yes, I know. Martin told me all about you. Come inside and sit down. Gracious, look at all these goodies. Are they for me? I hope you've had lunch—I've just this minute finished washing up."

The Metcalfes accepted a glass of the gift sherry and sat for the second time in the cluttered front room. They explained their reason for coming in the first place—a wish to tell Gilbert Brewer that they had met his new author.

"I'm not sure about my books in America," the writer said. "How they'll go down. They suit British readers, but over there—"

"You don't have a thing to worry about," Libby chimed in. "I read *Flight from Wild Waters* last night and I'm halfway through *Damn Your Wicked Ways*. They're nothing short of fabulous."

"How kind." Mavis Hanniford's voice was a fluting contralto. "Martin tells me he gave you his manuscript to read. He asked me to be sure to ask for your reactions. I'm afraid he can't be here today, he took the bus over to Canterbury. Some business with our solicitor."

"We read it," Metcalfe said. He managed to recall the title. "*Heated Dreams*. We both read it."

"And?" Mavis looked from face to blank American face. "He takes his writing very seriously, and I, for one, approve of that. Success has come to me perhaps too easily. I often think Martin has more talent in his little finger than I have in my whole body."

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The Metcalfes picked up their cue. The lesson for today was let us now praise Martin Hope. "It was terrific," Libby said. "Very heady stuff. It was good to read something that makes a person think."

"Superbly reasoned material," Metcalfe added. "Your brother is a writer of substance." In his mind, he saw a cow pasture, the ground littered with that substance.

Mavis was pleased. "He'll be delighted when I tell him. You see, he drinks a lot. He becomes despondent to the point of violence. He's probably having several too many in some pub in Canterbury right now. I always have trouble with him at times like this. Do you have the manuscript with you?"

Husband and wife exchanged an agonized expression. In their rush to purchase gifts, they had left Martin Hope's work in their room at the guest house. "I'm sorry," Metcalfe said, "we came without it. We can bring it tomorrow."

"I've a better idea," Mavis said. "Keep it and show it to your publisher friend in New York. Martin has never had any luck with publishers here. They keep sending his work back with no encouragement at all. But now, having made personal contact with you, and you so close to Mr. Brewer, and especially since you appreciate Martin's work—"

"Terrific idea," Libby agreed. "We'll show it to Gilbert as soon as we get back."

A further hour was spent mostly in conversation about romantic fiction. Then, as the visitors said goodbye at the open door, Mavis returned to the literature of Martin Hope. "You do think it has a chance of being published," she said.

"More than a chance," Metcalfe said. The lady obviously craved reassurance about her brother's future. "The Metcalfes and the Brewers are thick as thieves. We'll be seeing Gilbert later this week. He'll love Martin's work as much as we do."

In the car driving back to Ramsgate, Libby said: "That last was a crafty evasion. Love it as much as we do."

"She certainly cares for her brother a lot more than he does for her."

"Naturally. She's a success. It's easy for her to be generous."

In the morning, packed and ready to drive back to London, Metcalfe hefted the manuscript. "We can't do this," he said.

"I know."

"If we show it to Gilbert, he'll think we're joking. Somebody will

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have to get back to Martin Hope eventually and let him down. Better we do it now."

So they drove to Twinchurch and approached, for the last time, the white cottage by the sea. Metcalfe steered the car into the lane, bruised his knee yet again on the door frame as he got out, slammed the door by way of announcing their arrival, and followed his wife up the path.

She had already knocked and was peering through the glass, seeking signs of life. "We may be in luck," she said. "Nobody home. We can leave the manuscript and run."

"I don't like that. We owe them both some diplomatic words."

"You're right."

When it became clear nobody was going to come to the door, Metcalfe said: "It's a nice day. Maybe they're sitting out back in the sun."

He led the way across the lawn, down the side of the house past rose bushes and a rain barrel, to emerge in a back garden with a flagstone patio holding a pine table, a single chair, and, a few yards away on a patch of broken ground, an incinerator.

There was an acrid smell in the air of recent burning. The silence of the house, the curtained windows hiding whatever might be within, the broad area of turned earth, all combined to raise in Metcalfe a pang of suspicion. He left the patio and walked to where the incinerator stood well away from the house. There were no other dwellings in sight, only the distant headland and, beyond it, the sea.

It was a plain galvanized-iron incinerator, blackened from frequent use. The lid lay beside it in a patch of tall grass. Inside, mixed with the ash from ancient fires, could be seen a charred fragment of paisley fabric and the heel of a woman's shoe.

"Come and look at this," Metcalfe said.

Libby walked from the back door of the cottage where she had been trying to see past the curtains into the kitchen. She joined her husband. "Good Lord."

"Isn't that the dress Mavis Hanniford was wearing the other day?"

"Yes, and that heel is from the shoes she had on. I remember the grey leather."

"He's killed her, then." Metcalfe began walking toward the laneway where the car was parked.

Libby followed him. "I can believe it," she agreed. "After we fed him the champagne, it all came out. He spoke of her as if he hated her guts . . ."

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The only policeman they could find in Twinchurch was a part-time constable who reported motoring offenses to a station in Ramsgate. His main occupation was running a sub-postoffice which doubled as a variety store. He was a healthy-looking old timer with masses of grey hair combed with some glossy fixative. He spent the entire interview admiring Libby.

The story as Metcalfe told it did not seem to bother him. The description of the visits with Martin Hope and then with Mavis Hanniford evoked a nodding of the head. Then Metcalfe described the dress and shoes burned in the garden incinerator. At this, the officer's eyes widened and he blew a silent whistle.

"I never thought I'd live to hear about this," he said.

"I wasn't all that surprised," Libby said. "We spoke to both of them. Mavis seemed to like her brother, but the feeling was not reciprocated. Hope was jealous of her success. After a few drinks, he became very hostile."

"And yesterday," Metcalfe added, "when Hope was in Canterbury, Mavis told us he was probably in some pub and she often had trouble with him when he was drunk."

The postmaster had to go to his counter and sell some stamps. When he came back, he said: "You're concerned that Martin has murdered Mavis. It isn't so. It can't be so. They are the same person."

"What?"

"I think the word is transvestite. There are times when Martin likes to put on a dress and high-heeled shoes, and when that happens he becomes Mavis. The whole village knows and doesn't care. It's never been a big thing here in England. I believe you in America take a more serious view."

Now that it had been explained to Libby, she wondered why she hadn't seen it immediately. "Then all those romantic novels—Martin Hope writes them under the pseudonym of Mavis Hanniford."

"That's right."

"And that's why he hates her," Metcalfe concluded. "His own writing, his serious stuff, has never succeeded because it isn't good enough. So he has to live with the fact that he is successful only as a churner-out of mushy romances."

"What surprises me," the postmaster said, "is that he seems to have decided to call it quits with her after all these years. Your visit has changed his view of life. What in the world did you say to him?"

In the car, heading for London and the airplane back to New York,

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Libby said: "But they aren't mushy romances. They're good stories, damn it. He shouldn't give them up."

"It seems he has. The talented Mavis Hanniford is dead, killed off by the less-talented Martin Hope." Metcalfe drove grimly. "And you and I, Libby darling, are accessories before and after the fact."

"I feel like a rat. We told Martin, and next day confirmed to Mavis, that the man's work is good, that it stands a chance of being published. We lied."

"And now," Metcalfe said, "the only course left is for us to tell Gilbert Brewer the truth."

They told him. Over drinks before dinner in their cozy farm kitchen, they related to the fascinated publisher the whole story of Martin Hope, his unreadable writing, his dressing up as Mavis Hanniford, and his final decision to have done with the masquerade.

"Sorry, Gilbert," Libby said at the end. "It looks like no more Hanniford romances."

"I'm not worried," he said. "There are over forty of them in print in England now. They'll keep me going for some time. As for the Martin Hope project—" he turned a few pages of the manuscript, browsing "—I've published material equally obscure. I'll write a letter to Twinchurch praising it and asking for it to be completed." He raised his glass. "Here's to artistic concessions in the name of economic survival."

Two years later, *Heated Dreams* by Martin Hope won the Maitland Award as best first novel of the year. Gilbert Brewer said he had expected it all along, and the Metcalfes dined out for several months on their discovery of the author.

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a *NEW* Dave Brandstetter story by

JOSEPH HANSEN

The police records would be sealed, Catton told Dave.

"Not to everyone," Dave said. "I'll have Captain Ken Barker check them for me. He's an old friend. And he owes me . . ."

This is only the second short story about Los Angeles insurance investigator Dave Brandstetter by Joseph Hansen, whose "The Anderson Boy" won a scroll from the Mystery Writers of America for one of the five best mystery short stories published in 1983 and whose Brandstetter series of novels The New Yorker *has said reflects "a real gift for storytelling—for character, for scene, for pace independent of violence . . ."*

ELECTION DAY

by JOSEPH HANSEN

Shabby brick store-fronts slept against a background of brown hills in October sunlight that hadn't yet warmed up. It was early, but a place that served breakfast ought to be awake. Dave looked for it. This drab east end of Hollywood rarely saw much traffic. Now it consisted of a single faded peewee pickup truck, inching its way along at the curb, a mohawk-haired college-age boy in sweat pants and tank top trotting beside it. When the truck paused, he reached into it for a poster, red with white lettering. He slapped the poster against the naked trunk of a soaring palm tree and, with a shiny gun, stapled the poster in place. CATTON FOR CONGRESS. He and the truck moved on.

FAMOUS FARMHOUSE BREAKFASTS had a snappy new sign and an artfully antiqued plank front covering the original brick. A

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width of inky new blacktop beside it was painted with white bias lines. Dave left his Jaguar there and tried the knob of a door under a little outcrop of shingled roof. The knob turned but the door didn't give. He blinkered his eyes with cupped hands and peered through the glass. No one sat on counter stools nor at the small tables surfaced with gingham-patterned Formica. Behind the counter, glass coffee pots gleamed empty. Through a wide service window sheltered by another shingled roof edge, Dave saw no one moving in the kitchen. Things looked a little dusty.

He frowned at his watch. Seven thirty-two. OPEN DAILY, 6:00 A.M. TILL 2:00 P.M. was crisply lettered on the door glass. But CLOSED, a cardboard sign said, SORRY WE MISSED YOU. Dave glanced up and down the street. No one headed on foot for Famous Farmhouse Breakfasts. Only one car was in sight, parked up the block on the other side. Had Harvey and Carolyn Sweetzer given up? If so, where were they? They weren't at home. He'd been to their boxy stucco tract house before the dew had evaporated from the composition roof. No one had answered his ring at the front door nor his knock at the back. No car had stood in the driveway, none in the garage. He had misjudged the time they left for work. But they plainly weren't at work. So where were they? Carolyn Sweetzer's sister Elizabeth was dead, but they wouldn't be at a mortuary—not this early.

He sighed. His practice of not telephoning ahead sometimes wasted time in this way. He liked face-to-face encounters. People's expressions, the look in their eyes, the way they fidgeted if they did, or stiffened if they did, often told him what words wouldn't on the phone. The element of surprise sometimes made people blurt things out before they'd had a chance to think.

He turned away. He'd gauged locating the Sweetzers to be a sure bet. Little businesses like this held people close. He'd been wrong, hadn't he? There were no sure bets. He was dropping into the leather seat of the Jaguar when a car caromed into the parking lot and squealed to a sharp stop. A thin, balding man jumped out of it. He wore a beige polyester suit.

"Harvey Sweetzer?" he said.

"Sorry," Dave said. He had seen the man before, at the marshal's, at the courthouse. He was a process-server. Carmichael? Some name like that. "What's wrong?"

Carmichael had reached into the inside pocket of his jacket and half drawn out a paper. His face fell, and he pushed the paper back

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out of sight. "I know you," he said. "Damn, I thought I was getting a break." He frowned, chewed a thin, pale lower lip, then brightened. "Insurance, right? Death claims? Wait, I got the name to go with it. Brandstetter." Dave nodded and shook the cool, lifeless hand the man offered. The man's smile faded. "Oh, no. You don't mean to tell me he's dead. Oh, boy—is that going to leave a lot of people hung out to dry."

"Creditors?" Dave said.

"All that remodeling." The man waved a thin arm. "Outside, inside. Stoves, refrigerators, ventilation—you know what restaurant equipment costs? Contractors, painters, electricians, plumbers. He was crazy. Everybody who gave him credit was crazy."

He waved at the street. "Look at this neighborhood. Who do you see? Nobody. Three months ago, six, maybe, yeah. There was a plant where they assembled ballpoint pens, all right? Fifty, sixty workers. There was a lens-grinding lab, you know? Eyeglasses? Say another couple dozen people. But they folded. I mean, the country is in the worst shape since the Depression, so Harvey Sweetzer goes in hock twenty thousand bucks to fix up a broken-down beanery. What did it do—dawn on him? Did he kill himself? Is that why you're here?"

"It's about Bess Jessup," Dave said.

"The one that used to be a singer?" Carmichael nodded, sunlight glaring off his scalp. "Murdered. I saw it on the TV news. What's she got to do with Sweetzer?"

"She was his sister-in-law," Dave said.

Carmichael drew breath for another question, then didn't ask it. He turned his head a little, regarded Dave from the corners of his eyes, frowning. He gave a soft whistle. "Oh, hey. I get it. She had a life-insurance policy, right? And it just so happens Harvey Sweetzer is the beneficiary."

Dave pulled his legs into the Jaguar, closed the door, ran the window down. "Could be," he said, and started the engine. He smiled. "You could get your money yet. Can I ask you to move your car?"

"Yeah, sure. I got a lot of other suckers to hunt for."

Carmichael got into his no-color, no-model car. "Two things there's no shortage of." He slammed the door. "Optimism and bad debts." He backed the car into the empty street.

The fair-haired, blue-eyed boy in orange jail coveralls said, "He knocked, and it was a code knock she knew from before. She whispered to be quiet and he'd go away. But he knew she was there. And

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in a minute, he was tramping through the place, yelling her name. The bedroom door slams open, and he calls her bitch, drags her out of the bed, and starts punching her out."

Rader was the boy's name, and he sat looking glum on a grey-green steel chair, forearms resting on a grey-green steel table. Dave had seen his record. Rader had worn jail coveralls before. He still looked as if he should be rehearsing the role of an angel in a Christmas pageant. The man who looked as if he belonged in jail coveralls stood behind Rader, leaning against a grey-green wall, hands pocketed. Squat, swarthy, low-browed, Bren Larkin was a public defender. His tough appearance always amused Dave. The man was a model of decency.

Dave sat opposite Rader. He reached behind him and probed the pockets of the blue-denim jacket he'd hung on the back of his chair. He brought out cigarettes and pushed the pack across the table. Rader took a cigarette. Dave lit it for him. Rader said, "What kind of watch is that?"

Dave put away the lighter. "Matthiesen," he said. "So you jumped him with your knife."

"Which you were not supposed to have," Larkin said, "under the conditions of your parole."

"The conditions are stupid," Rader said. "This is Los Angeles, not Sweetwater. In Los Angeles, big black pimps come charging in on you when you're doing it with your girl." He looked through cigarette smoke at Dave. "The knife was in my jeans. On the floor. I yelled at him to cool it. Hell, he didn't even look my way. So I dove and got the knife and ran at him. He got the knife away from me and I got cut, didn't I?" He rubbed his ribs, wincing. "Bess was passing out, I was spouting blood, okay? Nothing happened to him. But he was the one who ran."

"No one saw him," Larkin said, "come or go. You ran, though. Stancliff saw you. The landlord."

"Hats Jimmerson was there." Rader looked sullen and stubborn. "I can't help it if the landlord didn't see him. Damn right I ran. It was my knife, and I wasn't supposed to have it, and I wasn't supposed to be consorting with ex-convicts and criminals, and I wasn't supposed to get in fights. The landlord was coming. 'What's happening? What's the matter?' I grabbed my clothes and went out the bedroom window and down the alley."

"Forgetting the five thousand dollars?" Larkin said.

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"I never heard of a Matthiesen watch," Rader said. "It looks expensive."

"It isn't," Dave said. "Not very."

"There wasn't any five thousand dollars," Rader said.

Larkin said, "In a brown supermarket sack."

"Give up." Rader looked disgust over his shoulder. "The detectives said it was wrapped in white plastic." He looked at Dave with a thin, pitying smile. "They're all alike. Think everybody's as stupid as they are. He wants me to say, 'No, it was wrapped in newspapers,' right?"

"He's on your side," Dave said.

"Nobody's on my side." Rader reached for a Pepsi can on the table. The bright chains on his wrists rattled. He tapped ash off his cigarette into the small opening in the top of the can. "I didn't see any five thousand dollars in any sack or plastic or newspapers or anything."

"It was there when they found her dead that night."

"She was alive when I left her," Rader said.

"It was your knife that killed her," Larkin said.

"Last I saw it, Hats had it," Rader said, "staring at it like it scared him shitless. My blood all over it. He must have dropped it before he ran out." Rader dragged on the cigarette and coughed. "Look, even the cops admit my fingerprints aren't on the knife."

"Only Bess Jessup's," Larkin said. "But it was your knife, you had a loud argument with your girl, you beat her up—the bruises are there to show it. The landlord heard the fight and saw you run. You have a record of robbery with violence. You used to beat up your wife when you had one."

Rader nodded. He looked thoughtfully at the manacles on his wrists. He slowly moved his wrists apart, stretching the chain as if measuring it for something. "If she'd had five thousand dollars," he said, "she would have told me about it. She'd have been wild with excitement. She'd been trying every which way to raise money for that record deal. She didn't say anything."

"Maybe she knew you the way the police know you," Larkin said. "Maybe she was afraid you'd steal it."

Rader smiled wryly at Dave. "And he's on my side?"

"He's thinking the way the D.A. would think," Dave said.

"Bullshit," Rader said. "I didn't take the money. It was there. You call that thinking?" He twisted his head to look at Larkin again. "Make sense, will you? Was it hidden—the five thou? Wasn't it out

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in plain sight? Didn't somebody say it was laying on the coffee table with her guitar?"

"That's where it was," Dave said.

"That doesn't mean she didn't have it in a closet," Larkin said, "and you found it—and she came in from the store or something and caught you taking it—and that was when the fight started, and you killed her."

"And then went off without the money?"

"You panicked. The landlord was banging on the door."

"I panicked, but I remembered to wipe my prints off the knife?" Rader poked his cigarette into the Pepsi can and stood up. "I want to go back to my cell. And I want another lawyer. Why didn't I take the knife with me?"

"Why didn't Jimmerson bring her the five thousand?"

"She was scared of him, she was hiding from him, for Christ sake. Ask him for money? He'd have her peddling her ass in bars again. He'd have her back on heroin. She was through with that life. She was going back to her singing career. She was good, you know? Listen to her tapes. She hadn't touched a twelve-string in years, but she was getting it all back. She was really working at it."

"Maybe Jimmerson killed her," Larkin said. "Finding her in bed with you. Before she went to prison for dealing, she was his lady. Maybe you're covering for him because if you don't, he'll kill you, too. He cut you to warn you."

Rader shook his head. "She was alive when I left."

"Yup." Larkin sighed, pushed away from the wall, rapped thick knuckles on the interrogation-room door. "I wish to hell she'd called the police."

"She didn't want me going back to Q," Rader said.

A uniformed officer opened the door from the hall.

Stancliff walked from his door down a long white room with skylights to a big broad drafting table, where he picked up a white mug with *S* on it. He slurped coffee from the mug and raised inquiring brows at Dave. "Coffee?"

"No, thanks." Dave looked at the drafting table. Cut-up sheets of printed matter on high-gloss paper lay there. Photographs. Miscellaneous letters of the alphabet in various type sizes and faces. Steel rulers, triangles, T-squares, French curves in thick amber plastic. X-acto knives and blue pencils. "Her place isn't sealed any longer. What have you done with her possessions?"

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"Nothing. I only straightened up the worst of the mess." Stancliff set down the mug and perched on a stool at the table. "Stuff was thrown every which way. Drawers, clothes, couch cushions. Otherwise, it's the way I found it." He was an attenuated man, with a trimmed grey beard, grey hair over his ears, hornrim glasses. Cheap white-cotton gloves covered his bony hands. "Fall is my busy season. Usually it's only Christmas—advertising fliers, all that. But this year it's elections, too. All I do is work and sleep." His laugh was wry. "And not really all that much of the latter." He pushed papers around, looking for something. "It will be January before I get down there." He found a brush with long, soft bristles and gently ran it over a pristine sheet of tagboard. He began to rule the tagboard with blue lines and corners, frowning, careful but quick.

Dave walked into a kitchenette at the far end of the room. Breakfast dishes were in the sink. There were vague smells of bacon and toast. A window was over the sink. He looked out and down. Below were garages, a small patio with floppy green plants in corners, a redwood gate to an alley. "I'd like a look at the place," he said.

"Here's the key." Stancliff rummaged among pushpins, ruling pens, and erasers in a grey-metal fishing-tackle box. "She didn't have much. She'd just come out of a drug rehab program, you know. Clothes, guitar, tape recorder, and a carton of old clippings—that was about it. Everything else came with the apartment." He placed a key in Dave's hand.

"Thank you." Dave went down the long room again. Books were stacked everywhere. Art magazines. On a roughly built plank loft in a corner lay a mattress with tumbled blankets. On the ladder to the loft cast-off clothes hung—none of them women's clothes. Dave stopped at the door. "She was right down below you. A musician. Trying to write new songs, take up a career again. Wasn't it noisy?"

"Nothing distracts me when I'm working. Concentration. That's the secret of success. Look around you. Conspicuous, isn't it—my tremendous success in life?" He drew another blue line. "Only the fights. They bothered me."

"You mean with Mike Rader? Had he beaten her before?"

"Not that. Just arguments. She was high-strung, lost her temper easily. He didn't know how to handle it. Sometimes I wondered if I'd been wise, renting to her. I didn't like that kid. What did she want with him, anyway? He was young enough to be her son. A convict, a thief. She needed someone mature, steady, decent."

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"So when you saw him running away after the fight, it seemed logical to you that he was the one who'd killed her."

"Not then, no. I didn't know anyone had killed anyone. I'd run downstairs, shouting to them to stop, but I don't think they heard me. I ran back up here to phone the police, but then it went quiet. I was giving myself a belt of nerve-steadier in the kitchen when I saw him run across the patio. Flop. He was trying to put on his pants. He was stark naked. I remember laughing."

"He was bleeding," Dave said.

"I didn't see that. Later, the police showed me the blood-smears on the windowsill and the drops across the patio, but I didn't notice it when he ran off."

"You didn't phone the police?"

"What for?" Stancliff shrugged. "It was over."

"Completely," Dave said. "You didn't go downstairs to check whether she was all right?"

Stancliff looked away. "I should have, shouldn't I? The truth is, I'd been working around the clock to meet a deadline—not eating, keeping myself going on coffee and uppers. And that double Scotch hit me like a two-by-four. I passed out. When I came to, it was dark. That didn't bother me so much as the silence. I was used to hearing her music all the time. The silence was eerie. It worried me. So then I did go down to see if she was all right."

"And she was dead," Dave said.

"And she was dead." Pain muffled Stancliff's words. Tears wet his eyes. "She was a wonderful, beautiful person. She'd had a rotten run of luck, but that was over. Marvelous talent." He gave a soundless, sorry laugh. "I thought I wanted that once—talent. Not for music, for art. But from what I've seen, it involves too much suffering. Read their lives. Talented people have a miserable time of it."

Dave opened the door. "I'll bring the key back," he said, and went out and closed the door.

The curtains were drawn, so the light was dim. He found pull ropes and rattled the curtains open. The twelve-string guitar lay on a coffee table. It was blotched with fingerprint powder. So were the room's other surfaces. The guitar was all that showed anyone special had lived here. That and the big reel-to-reel tape recorder. Its bright-work caught the light. He put on reading glasses, switched on amplifier and tape deck, and set the reels turning. Bargain loudspeakers sat on a dusty hardwood floor. From the speakers came a sweet,

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steady voice singing lyrics that rhymed "protects" with "MX," as in missile. Rader exaggerated. Nervously was how she managed the twelve-string. Dave switched off the system and tucked away his glasses.

Nothing had been tidied in the kitchen. Tins that had held TV dinners lay in the sink, a faucet dripping into them. There were soiled forks. Empty diet-soft-drink cans stood on the counter beside the sink. Cupboard doors hung slightly open. Inside waited a few clean plates, drinking glasses, mugs. The empty shelves were just that—empty. So was the refrigerator freezer compartment, whose ice-cube tray held only ice cubes. The main part of the refrigerator contained a carton of skim milk, a six-pack of diet cola, a jar of grapefruit juice. The wastebasket under the sink was stuffed with stained hamburger wrappers, pizza tins, fried-chicken buckets, more soft drink cans. The stove top wore a film of dust.

The bedroom held bed, chest, mirror, lamp, clock. The bed had been stripped. The police lab would have wanted a look at Rader's bloodstains. The closet contained mostly jeans and blouses, a couple of skirts, no dresses. Bright colors, though—brave, humorous. A pair of shiny fake leather boots, worn Adidas, no carton of clippings. In the chest of drawers, sweaters, gaudy T-shirts, pantyhose, a couple of bras in boxes yet to be opened. Penney's, Woolworth's. Nothing uncommon in the bathroom medicine cabinet—aspirin, cold capsules, antacid tablets, tampons. Only one prescription drug—a folder of contraceptive pills. No forbidden drugs. No syringes, needles, rubber tubing. He closed the mirrored door and stretched to run his hand along the top of the cabinet. A dusty key, the flat kind, stamped out. Nothing to identify it except a number—twenty-three. He dropped it into his pocket.

Under the lid of the toilet tank he found no plastic envelopes of cocaine, heroin, marijuana, PCP, quaaludes. No drugs lay anchored in balloons in the bottom of the tank. In the clothes hamper, a tall basket woven of split bamboo, was nothing but dirty laundry. He crouched and opened the vanity doors under the washbasin. Toilet-bowl cleaner, air freshener, a flat, dry, blue cellulose sponge, a pink-bristled toilet-bowl brush, two bars of bath soap. He unwrapped these to be sure. The perfume of the soap was strong. He felt around carefully in the dark corners behind pipes under the basin. Nothing. He closed the doors, rose, switched off the light, left the bathroom.

When he stepped into the living room again, he thought he saw for an instant a face at the window. He went to the window. Nothing

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stirred outside. The landscaping was desert plants set in coarse white gravel. No one hurried off up the sunny street on foot. Not a car moved. He turned back, frowning. If not to buy drugs, why had someone brought Bess Jessup five thousand dollars in small bills? He sat on a smudged couch and lifted the guitar from the coffee table. When he laid it on the floor, its strings hummed.

The table was strewn with music manuscript and blue-lined notebook pages. On these, in ballpoint pen, were written the words of songs. Dave put on his reading glasses again. Her subjects were Three Mile Island, Times Beach, and how war kills children. He laid music and words aside, pushed away glossy campaign mailers, *Catton for Congress*. Beneath lay letters with the logos of recording companies. What the letters indicated was that Bess Jessup had sent reminders of her long-lapsed career, along with new audition tapes, to a number of places that didn't care.

And to one that did. A little bit. Jawal Singh was cautiously friendly. He was president of Seesaw Records. His letter Dave folded and pushed into a pocket. He put away his glasses, closed the curtains, locked the apartment, and returned the door key to Stancliff. The found key he showed the gaunt man, who took it in white-gloved fingers, frowning. "Belong to anything of yours?" Dave asked.

"Never saw it before," Stancliff said. "You want it?"

"For a little while," Dave said.

He was a few steps down the concrete strip between the white-graveled plantings when he heard a hiss behind him. He turned. At a corner of the building, a worried-looking man made a beckoning gesture. He wore a Levi outfit he was too fat for and a billed cap with *Dr. Pepper* stitched on its front. Behind the man, a VW van's windshield reflected the sun. It was noon, and the sun was hot by now. Dave crunched across the gravel to the man, who whispered:

"Brandstetter? The insurance man?"

"That's me." Dave handed him a card.

"Harvey Sweetzer," the man said. "They told me at the insurance-company office that you'd be coming here. Something wrong? Aren't we going to get the money?" He kept looking past Dave up and down the street, and he hurried his words. "I really need that money. For my business."

"I know," Dave said. A fat woman was staring at him through the windshield of the van. She wore sunglasses, but neither these nor the fleshiness of her cheeks hid her likeness to her dead sister, of

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whom the police had photographs Dave had seen. "Why did someone toss her apartment?"

"What?" Sweetzer said. "What?"

"The landlord said that when he found your sister-in-law's body, the apartment was a wreck, everything thrown every which way. Why?"

"How the hell would I know?" Sweetzer said. "We didn't associate with her. We're not that kind of people."

"She kept a box of clippings. It's not in the police report, and it's not in the apartment."

"Probably old stuff from when she was a singer. She had a start, you know." The door of the van opened. Sweetzer turned. "Carolyn, never mind." He said to Dave, "Then the Vietnam war ended and all that radical stuff dried up. And first it was drugs, then prostitution. A hooker." He wagged his head glumly. "My own wife's sister."

"You didn't take the clippings? You didn't tear the apartment up, looking for this key? She had it hidden."

"Me?" Sweetzer's eyes opened as wide as the pouches of fat around them allowed. "We've never even been here. Look—when do we get the check? I've got a lot of people I owe money to, breathing down my neck."

Carolyn called from the van, "We can't even show our faces, can't open the café, can't even go home." She sounded on the verge of tears. "You have to help us."

"The check won't be sent until I clear it," Dave said, "and I have a lot of questions about your sister's death."

"That no-good convict kid stabbed her," Sweetzer said. "The one she was living with, sleeping with. Ex-druggie, like herself. That's how that kind of people live. That's how she'd been living for fifteen years. What are you talking about? What questions?"

"If she was so contemptible," Dave said, "why did you keep up the payments on her life insurance? You didn't want anything to do with her. You never came to see her. She was trying to start a new life—no more drugs, no more prostitution. She'd been through rehabilitation. She was writing songs, trying for a record deal. You didn't care."

Sweetzer's laugh was sour and pitying. "You don't know much about those kind of people, I guess. You know how many times she'd told Carolyn and me she was through with all that sordid stuff, she

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was going to start over with her music and all that? So many times I lost count."

Now Carolyn did clamber down from the van. A scarf was tied over her head. Her fat hips were packed into jeans. She came at a ding-toed walk to stand beside her husband. "We helped her. Helped her again and again. We never knew in the middle of the night when the phone would ring, and she'd be in jail again, or at some hospital, and crying for us to come and bail her out, or whatever."

"That's why I took out the life insurance," Sweetzer said. "Because the way she was living—hell, she was living with a black man, did you know that? Anybody with a grain of sense knew she was going to end up dead one of these times. Murdered. It was in the cards."

"We tried to save her." Tears leaked from under Carolyn's dark glasses. "We brought her from jail that time, to live with us, her own room and all. Gave her a job waitressing at the café."

Sweetzer snorted. "How long do you think that lasted?"

Carolyn blew her nose loudly on a Kleenex.

"We're her only family," Sweetzer said. "We'd have to bury her when the day came. That's why I kept up the policy."

"Fifty thousand dollars will buy a lot of funeral," Dave said.

"Listen," Sweetzer said, "I don't add up what I do out of the goodness of my heart. But we're not rich people, and over the years we emptied our pockets for her, paid her back-rent, utilities, got her guitar out of hock, paid her bail-bondsmen, paid her fines. When it's your own wife's sister, you do what you have to do. You think I'm some kind of mean, grasping guy, wanting this insurance money. Well, I never asked her for a dime back, when she was alive."

"You have to help us," Carolyn said. "We're being hounded like we were animals. We have to sleep in the van. People can only keep that up so long."

Dave said, "Where do you park it to sleep in it?"

Sweetzer shrugged. "Beach. Out-of-the-way places."

"The night she was killed?" Dave said.

"Oh, my goodness." Carolyn took a step backward.

Sweetzer tried to sound truculent but he only squeaked. "What the hell do you mean by that?" Sweat broke out on his upper lip. "Are you accusing us?"

"No, but I don't think Mike Rader killed her," Dave said. "He didn't have a reason."

"And we do?" Carolyn cried. "My own sister?"

"Drug addicts don't need reasons," Sweetzer said.

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"The tests show he's clean of drugs," Dave said.

"We were in Griffith Park. We weren't in anybody's way. Couldn't even be seen from the road. But the patrol found us and rousted us out," Sweetzer said in disgust.

"What time was that?" Dave said.

"Let's go, Carolyn." Sweetzer took her fat arm and steered her ahead of him back to the van. "We don't have to answer his questions."

"It will be on the park patrol records," Dave said. "You may as well tell me. Or won't it be on the records?"

"Yeah." Sweetzer pushed Carolyn up into the van. "It's on the damn records. They issued us a citation. We haven't got enough troubles. A little after seven." He slammed the passenger door and walked around to the driver's side. He opened the door. "Who do I go to at that insurance company to get some action?"

"I never heard of anyone like that at an insurance company," Dave said.

Dave entered Max Romano's restaurant through the kitchen as usual. The air was hot and steamy, heady with smells of garlic, parmesan, basil. He gave a lift of the hand to the somber, gaunt head chef, Alex, spoke the names of the other kitchen help, and pushed into the restaurant that hummed and clinked with conversation, eating, drinking. Max drew a good lunchtime crowd. Dave glanced toward the corner table Max always reserved for him. He expected to see Cecil Harris waiting there. A television-news field reporter, Cecil was young, black, gangly as a basketball player. He lived with Dave. But he wasn't sitting at the corner table. Hats Jimmerson was, a huge hulk of a man in a shiny black mohair suit, green shirt, wide flame-colored necktie. Max Romano appeared at Dave's elbow, clutching menus, worried.

"I'm sorry," he said. "He insisted."

"You did the right thing," Dave said. Heart pounding, he edged his way between tables. Jimmerson glowered at him. Dave said, "What the hell does this mean?"

"It mean," Jimmerson rumbled, "never send a boy on a man's errand. How can anybody so smart act so stupid? Sit down. You attracting attention. I don't need that."

"Where is Cecil?" Dave said.

"I said, sit down. If you do like I say in every way, Cecil going to be okay." Jimmerson looked at a wristwatch studded with diamonds.

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Diamonds glittered in rings on his thick fingers. "I expect he is enjoying lunch at this moment with some of my people. Barbecued ribs? Barbecued chicken? I forget today's menu."

Dave sat down because his legs felt weak. Cecil's assignment had been only to locate Jimmerson. Dave had warned him not to go near the man, not to take any risks. Jimmerson was right. Dave had been stupid. Max came now and set down a stocky glass of Glenlivet on the rocks. He and Dave had been friends for almost forty years. They always exchanged small talk. Not today. Max hovered for a nervous moment, then went doubtfully away.

"What did he do?" Dave tasted the Scotch. "Come ring your doorbell?"

Jimmerson shook his head. "He was just asking too many people too many questions. I have a great many friends. One of them was bound to phone me up. Just because a man is black don't mean he'll go unnoticed in the black community. I assume you were thinking along those lines?"

"Something like that," Dave said. "And he's a good investigator. He told you why I wanted to locate you?"

Jimmerson's drink was green. He took a sip of it and nodded. "Yes. You want to clear a young prevaricator of a murder charge against a lady I once knew."

"Were you there?" Dave said. "For my information only. I won't make any trouble for you. I don't want Cecil hurt."

Jimmerson said slowly and distinctly, "I have not laid eyes on Bess Jessup since we split up two years ago, when they busted her for dealing cocaine. I didn't even know she was out of prison, let alone where she was living. And don't jive me, Mr. Brandstetter, please. Wherever you go, trouble ain't but two, three steps behind."

"You know where everybody's living," Dave said.

"Including you." Jimmerson picked up a hat from the carpet. It was shiny black straw with a wide brim and a cerise plume wrapped around the band. "It so happen—" he got to his feet; he was a good six foot five, a good three hundred pounds "—that on that afternoon, with twenty other distinguished guests, I was having cocktails with the president of the Annenberg estate in Palm Springs."

"The district attorney wants Mike Rader dead," Dave said. "He's no boy scout, but he doesn't deserve that."

"He be all right." Jimmerson put on the hat and smiled. A diamond glittered in each of his incisors. "He got a friend. That what we all of us need in this life. Friends. That why the po-lice have such a lot

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of bad luck when it come to me. See, the po-lice, they just naturally ain't got no friends."

He chuckled, picked up his glass, finished off the green drink, set the glass down, licked his lips. "But me—I got nothing but friends. That why the po-lice didn't look very hard for me when this felonious child told them his story. That why you shouldn't have put your skinny young associate to the trouble. The day Bess Jessup lost her life, I was with my friends. It don't matter which of my friends gets asked was I with them—I was with them. All right?"

"Someone brought her five thousand dollars in small bills that day," Dave said. "Any idea who that would be?"

"Not me." The diamonds in Jimmerson's teeth flashed again. "I don't deliver. I collect."

"She owned a box of clippings," Dave said. "It's gone."

"She always had that. It didn't mean nothing. Just old, no-good memories. Trash. Nobody would steal that."

"This mean anything to you?" Dave laid the key down.

Jimmerson frowned at it, turned it over with sparkling fingers. "It a key. Where to? Don't look like much."

Dave put the key away. "When do I see Cecil?"

"Relax. Enjoy your lunch. And I think I can promise you—" Jimmerson consulted the jeweled watch again "—that he will be joining you for dessert."

"Captain Barker will like hearing that," Dave said.

"Give the Captain my regards," Jimmerson said, "and tell him that I am going to be traveling abroad, indefinitely. I think it is time for me to go check on my Swiss bank accounts." He tilted his hat and strolled out. A good many people stopped eating to watch him.

Dave got up to follow and sat down again. But he didn't relax, didn't enjoy his lunch. He nibbled at the spinach salad, choked down a bite or two of bread, left untouched the best Alfredo in town. He was on his third Scotch, staring into it, disgusted with himself, when Cecil dropped into his customary chair and grinned at him.

"Thank God," Dave said. "They didn't hurt you."

"I don't like barbecue that spicy," Cecil said, "but you better believe I ate it without complaining." He sobered. "Look, I'm sorry I messed up. I thought I was being discreet. Then all of a sudden I'm riding off between two gorillas in a long black limousine, just like on TV. 'Mr. Jimmerson would like a few words with you.' Whoo-ee!"

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"Don't apologize," Dave said. "It was my mistake. I'm thankful you came out unscathed. He was there, all right."

"He admitted it?" Cecil looked surprised.

"No, but those cuts on Bess Jessup's face came from his rings—I'd bet on it. If we could search his place, we'd find clothes of his with her blood on them. And Rader's."

"*You* search his place," Cecil said. "I'll stay home."

"There's no point," Dave said, and watched Max set down a green Heineken bottle and a tall, frosty glass for Cecil. Dave said, "Max? You all right?"

"That man looked like some kind of criminal," Max said. "I was ready to call the police."

"You're a shrewd judge of character," Dave told him.

"In this business, you get to know." With a sage nod into his double chins, Max waddled away.

Cecil measured beer into his glass, tasted it, wiped foam from his upper lip.

"No point?" he said.

"Hats didn't kill her. Her bruises had time to develop, darken, swell. She was killed later. The body-temperature test allows a two-hour leeway. The examiner wrote down five-thirty because Stancliff said that was the time of the fight."

"Hats could have come back," Cecil said. "So could Rader."

"And left without the five thousand dollars?" Dave said.

"You're a shrewd judge of character," Cecil said.

Seesaw Records' offices and studios were on the second floor of a weary brick building in a district where no one swept the sidewalks. Big cardboard cartons of records narrowed a dim hallway at the top of the stairs up from the street. Microphone booms, coiled black-rubber cables, leaning guitar cases.

Dave stepped around the tarnished carcass of an old Scully tape-deck to knock on a door whose cracked opaque glass was lettered with Jawal Singh's name. A high, musical voice told him to come in. The office needed fresh paint. The ceiling showed that, not the walls—they were covered with posters, album jackets, yellowing photographs of singers and instrumentalists, and eight or ten gold records mounted behind dusty plexiglass. A tiny brown man with long, smoky-black hair sat at a desk stacked with reels of tape, albums, and cassettes, and strewn with papers and little white car-

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tons that had once held Chinese take-out food. The tiny man had big, glistening brown eyes and dazzling teeth.

"How can I help you?" He rose, held out a tiny hand. TAXIDERMY was lettered across his T-shirt. The elaborate calligraphy had faded. Dave shook the hand. Jawal Singh said, "You don't look like someone in the music business." Dave gave him a card. He read the card, frowned, smiled once more. "I have heard of you. Yes, I think I have even seen you on the television. What an honor. Please sit down."

"Thank you." Dave looked for a chair that wasn't stacked with records, tapes, copies of *Rolling Stone*, and didn't see one. He set the stack from the chair nearest the desk on the floor and sat down. "I've come about Bess Jessup. For the company that insured her life."

"Ah. What a tragedy. A talented girl. I think she was just beginning to get it together." Singh's speech was elegant and precise, a touch of London in it, a memory of Delhi. "She had been through many difficult years. Now she wanted to resume the career that drugs destroyed."

"Also changing times," Dave said.

"The world is always surprising us," Singh said. "Who could have guessed that all our marches of protest, our speeches and songs and petitions could have brought about the ending of that war? And by Mr. Nixon! I was totally taken by surprise." He glanced around the woebegone office. "I sometimes wonder if I will ever recover. I was deeply committed to peace. But I was not prepared for it. This operation of mine was not like other record companies. It was a crusade on my part. I chose my artists for the message they had to bring the world—peace, brotherhood."

"And the world lost interest," Dave said. He nodded at Singh's T-shirt. "Taxidermy?"

"Ah." Singh touched the letters with a sheepish smile. "Yes. They were my one successful bid to break with the crusading past, to enter the world of—what did they call it?—'the me generation'?"

"That's what they called it," Dave said.

"Taxidermy were very gifted young people. Rock artists. For a little while, they enjoyed great fame and fortune. Regularly they topped the charts." He waved at the gold records. "Those were theirs. It was a time of unwonted prosperity for me." He smiled wistfully for a moment, remembering, then grew mournful. "But they were too young to cope with the success. One by one, they destroyed themselves with drugs."

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"Are you satisfied that Bess Jessup had really gone off drugs for good? On the night she was killed, someone brought her five thousand dollars. She couldn't have been dealing again?"

"One cannot, of course, predict human behavior," Singh said. "I should be deeply disturbed to think it. But she was having a difficult time raising the required ten thousand dollars for me to produce her new album."

"Is that the custom?" Dave said. "For the artist to put up part of the money?"

"It is the custom when a company is as near extinction as this one." Singh smiled faintly. "And when one knows that human behavior cannot be predicted, particularly that of addictive personalities, however good their intentions."

"In other words," Dave said, "you thought that if she had to raise a bundle to put into the album, it might keep her straight."

Singh nodded. "But not principally. The truth is, I have the recording facilities here, and I have still a fair distribution system, but almost no capital, and certainly no capital to waste." He frowned. "I do hope that she did not resort to drug-dealing to raise the money. Guilt for that would be upon me for the rest of my days—doubly so, since it apparently resulted in her death."

"You were going to handle the advertising and publicity, too, I suppose," Dave said. "Did she happen to bring you a box of clippings about her career in the Sixties?"

"How did you know?" Singh's brows rose.

"It should have been in her apartment and it wasn't."

Singh popped out of his chair. "It is right here." He shifted tapes, albums, and papers off another chair and laid in Dave's hands a department-store suitbox. Dave sat down and took off its sunken lid. He found loose clippings, photographs, scrapbooks. The box was too roomy for them.

"Please feel free to examine it all," Singh said. "It will show you why she might indeed have come back. She was hoping, once the album was released, to fly to West Germany and join in the protests against the U.S. deployment of missiles there. There it is as it used to be here. Excuse me." He went to the office door. "I have some editing to do. I will be in studio A if you need me."

"Thank you," Dave said.

When Singh came back, Dave was fitting the lid onto the box. He lifted it once more and took out to show to Singh a newspaper feature,

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grown yellow around its edges, cracked at its folds. There was a photograph three columns wide. It showed a platform filled with war-protest celebrities. Peace posters waved in the picture's foreground. Banners hung over the platform and along its edge. Bess Jessup stood at a microphone with her guitar, her hair blowing in the wind. A young man, tall, slender, fair, stood beside her, clutching a sheaf of papers. Dave pointed him out to Singh. "You think that's the same Jack Catton who's now running for Congress?"

Singh nodded. "I asked her that very question. She said yes, but so bitterly that I regretted having spoken. She and Jack Catton were lovers then. They lived together. Both were very active in the anti-war movement. He earned his living as a journalist for the *Free Press, Open City*, the other counter-culture papers—all vanished now." Singh's laugh was sad. "How long ago that was."

"Maybe not," Dave said.

Catton came at a long-legged stride up the brightly lighted airport tunnel from the Sacramento four o'clock shuttle flight. He was in a crowd of other passengers, but he stood out. For one thing, he was taller. For another, his hair shone brassy as a new trumpet. He was handsome, and his pace, the way he swung his attaché case, spelled energy. Here was a man not just leaving an aircraft and heading for office or home. Here was a man going someplace important. He'd put on weight since the Sixties, but he was still trim. A plump young woman hurried along beside him on short legs. He talked to her. Rapidly.

Dave stepped into his way and handed him a card.

"Mr. Catton? Dave Brandstetter. Can I talk to you?"

Catton blinked at him, at the card. "Insurance? I'm sorry. I have all I need." He started to step around Dave.

"I'm a death-claims investigator," Dave said. "It's about Elizabeth Jessup. Bess. You used to know her."

Catton's skin had a childlike transparency. He blushed. He looked sharply at the plump girl. "Lucy—go phone and say the flight was late. I'm running behind. I'll be there as soon as I can. Wait for me at the car, okay?"

"I'll bring it around," she said. "Don't be long, Jack. It's the mayor, remember." She looked harried, sweaty, rumpled, but she summoned a smile for Dave. "Try not to keep him long," she pleaded.

"Let's go to the coffee shop," Catton said.

"The bar will be less crowded," Dave said . . .

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Catton drank Perrier water.

"All I know about it is that she was murdered. Her lover stabbed her. I really don't have time to read a newspaper these days. When I see television it's because it's going in a room I'm running through. I'm sorry she's dead. She meant a lot to me once. Everything. But that was in megalithic times."

Dave drank Scotch—not very good Scotch but it was all there was. "Why did the two of you break up?"

Catton read his watch. "Dear God, that was nineteen seventy, man. Fourteen years ago. I haven't seen her since. I was in New York for five years—"

"In journalism," Dave said. "Starting with the *Village Voice* and branching out to the big national liberal weeklies—it got you name recognition." Dave had spent an hour researching Catton at the library after leaving Jawal Singh. "Then, when you decided to go into politics, you came back to Los Angeles."

"It was home," Catton said. "My roots are here."

"First the Gene McCarthy presidential campaign, then the school board, then the state assembly, now Congress. And you never looked up Bess Jessup? Why not?"

"I heard what had happened to her." Catton looked somber. "Drugs, prostitution, prison." He gazed at the far glass wall, beyond which glossy white jetliners taxied white runways. "Anyway, we were through. She was a dreamer. I was—" his smile was thin, one-cornered "—into action, right? And we'd both been very young. I thought we believed in the same ideals. But for her, it was all just a big emotional high."

"You were into all of it," Dave said, "from draft-card burning to women's lib, even the black activists." Dave smiled slightly, eyeing Catton's blondness. "Ideals? Not just politics—building for your future?"

"This isn't getting us anyplace. What do you want?"

Dave told Catton Bess Jessup's story. "She wasn't having much luck raising the money. Some of your campaign literature was on her coffee table. I wondered if she'd come to you for a loan."

Catton stared. "Are you serious? She hated me. Two people never broke up with less chance of ever getting together again. Come to me for money? Bess? No way."

"You didn't feel sorry for her and take her five thousand dollars out of your campaign fund? Cash? Small bills? In a supermarket sack? You didn't deliver it?"

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"I'm not listening to any more." Catton snatched up his briefcase from an empty chair and stood. "You go tell whoever sent you that trying to link my name to Bess Jessup's now isn't going to do a damn bit of good. I haven't seen her. If she did come to me, I'd refuse to see her. I'm sorry she had a rough life, but it was also a well publicized life, and every story was more squalid than the last. And I'm not having my name connected to a woman like that. No politician would." He started off again.

"No one sent me." Dave fell in beside him. "I'm investigating her murder, that's all. If there's no need to bring your name into it, I won't bring it in."

"Believe me," Catton snarled, "there's no need."

"Whoever brought her that money," Dave said, "also ransacked her apartment. Can you suggest why?"

"Obviously looking for drugs," Catton said. He pushed out through glass doors to a broad sidewalk busy with luggage carts, with men, women, and children arriving and departing. Cars inched along, bumper to bumper, or paused at curbside, unloading passengers and baggage. "There's my ride," Catton said.

"One last thing." Dave held out the key. "I found this hidden in her apartment. She kept souvenirs from the past. Is this one? Does it recall anything to you?"

Catton snatched it, scowling, turned it over in his hand, gave it back. "Nothing. Now, will you excuse me, please? I have a very important appointment." He ran toward a shiny black Seville at the curb. The plump young woman, who leaned across to open the passenger door for him, looked ready to weep with impatience.

Dave dropped the key back into his pocket.

One look at the airport-terminal lockers showed him the key wouldn't work in their doors. He took the long way home from the airport and stopped at the Greyhound bus station in Santa Monica. The key went grudgingly into the lock of number twenty-three, but it wouldn't turn and almost refused to come loose again. Dusk had reached the canyon before him. High overhead, the sky held transparent blue-green light, but down here between the shaggy, shadowy hills, cars had to climb the crooked road with their headlights on. It was night for sure by the time Dave jounced down into his yard off Horseshoe Canyon Road. His headlights flared back at him from the long row of French doors that fronted his odd house.

He parked the Jaguar, switched off the lights, climbed wearily

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out. He rounded the front building and crossed the uneven bricks of the courtyard under a dark, spreading oak whose dry leaves crackled beneath his shoes. He switched on lights in the cookshack and built himself a double martini. He would carry it across to the back building, where, this morning, he had readied kindling and logs in the big fireplace. With the setting of the sun, October had asserted itself. A chill was in the air. He turned off the cookshack lights, stepped out, carrying the icy drink, and pulled the door shut behind him. He took two steps in the familiar dark. At his back, someone else took a step. He made a sharp half turn. Something hard struck his skull. He went down. The splintering of glass was the last thing he heard for a long time.

"All that blood." Cecil stood at the foot of the bed where Dave sat propped on pillows, feeling wan in the morning sunshine that poured down from a skylight not far above him in the raftered, plank roof of the sleeping loft. "When I got here at midnight and saw all that blood, I thought you were dead for sure." He set a bentwood breakfast tray on Dave's knees. "But where *were* you? I phoned everybody before I had the sense to look up here. And here you were, sleeping like a little child, head all wrapped in white."

"Nothing bleeds like a scalp wound," Dave said. "I didn't notice the mess I was making. I had to telephone. The paramedics got here in no time. After I was stitched up, the hospital wanted to keep me overnight, but I took a taxi back here. I didn't phone you at work because I didn't want to upset you."

"Drink the orange juice," Cecil said. "Drink the coffee. You need liquids to replace the blood."

Dave frowned around him. "What went with my clothes?"

"I stuffed them in a plastic bag. They're ruined."

"Look in the left pocket of the jacket," Dave said.

Cecil went down the raw-pine plank steps from the loft. He was gone for a few minutes. Dave drank the orange juice. His stomach almost turned over, but not quite. He tried the coffee cautiously. That was better. Cecil climbed back up the stairs. "Nothing in the left pocket. Nothing in any of the pockets. Stole your watch, your wallet, your checkbook—even your reading glasses. Why would they leave anything in your pockets?"

"They only wanted the key," Dave said.

The light had changed when Dave woke again. He was sweating.

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The noon sun beating down on the roof made the loft hot. The smell of pine lumber was strong, and underlying it was a faint memory of hay and horse: these buildings he called home had once been stables. He had tried earlier to get out of bed but his head had reacted badly. He tried again now, tentatively, a few inches at a time. If he took it slow, it felt as if it would be all right. He got to the stairs. They appeared to swim. He gripped the rail until the dizziness stopped. Then he made his way carefully down to the bathroom.

When he came out of the bathroom, Cecil had returned and was standing, studying him, worried.

"You look sick." He took Dave's arm. "Back to bed."

"What did you find?" Dave said.

"You were right. She chose the place nearest to where she lived—the Trailways depot. But they'd been and gone. Key was in the lock." Cecil's support was welcome. Dave seemed to want to fall over. "The inside looked empty and I started to leave it, when I saw a piece of paper. It was stuck in the weld at the back. Half a piece of paper."

"Let me see it," Dave said.

"When we've got you up these stairs," Cecil said.

It was an old photocopy, discolored and sooty. Part of a letter—happily, the part that bore the letterhead. Students Against War. And the date, 15 August 1970. Dave missed his reading glasses, but by squinting he made out some of the typing. The sense of it was lost in the past, however. It was a fragment from the middle of some ongoing plan of action—a rally, a demonstration, a march? Dave studied the letterhead again. The address was on Vermont Avenue, near City College. But Students Against War wouldn't be there now. Students Against War wouldn't be anywhere now. A list of officers ran partway down the left edge of the page in tiny type. Dave handed the paper to Cecil.

"Can you read those names?"

Cecil read them to him. Dave smiled.

Andy Levitan had freckles and kinky red hair. Dave knew him because he was a junior partner of Abe Greenglass, Dave's attorney. He didn't know him well, merely to speak to. But Dave had asked Abe Greenglass to send Andy Levitan to his house. Now he sat on the edge of Dave's bed and frowned through hornrim glasses with

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very large, round lenses at the torn scrap of letterhead. He smiled with irony and slowly shook his head.

He handed the paper back. "Where the hell did you get this?"

"Bess Jessup had it," Dave said.

"I saw where she was murdered. You looking into that?"

"Was she part of Students Against War?" Dave said.

"She sang at all our rallies, but she wasn't a member. Boy, I never expected to see that letterhead again. That was a thousand years ago. 'Andy Levitan, Executive Secretary.' How seriously we took ourselves." He tilted his head at Dave, forehead creased. "You think this had something to do with her death? How could that be? Anyway, what was she doing with it?"

"I was hoping you could tell me," Dave said.

"I thought we destroyed every piece of paper in that office," Levitan said. "In one very large, very hasty bonfire. You see, we'd planned a major assault on the system—a raid on a draftboard, to burn their records."

Cecil whistled. "What happened?"

"It was a close secret, all right? But somebody told the police, and they were there, waiting for us in the dark. Surprise! They let us splash the kerosene around, almost let us light the match, before they switched on the lights. We got out on bail, but we figured we were done for, that we'd spend the rest of our lives in prison. They'd sealed our offices, put a guard on, but we broke in the back and stole our own files and destroyed them."

"You had a spy in your midst," Dave said.

Levitan nodded. "Bob Broughton. It had to be him. He didn't get prosecuted—'insufficient evidence.' After which he joined the Marines. Jack Catton wanted to kill him." Levitan's laugh was short and bleak. "As it turned out, Vietnam killed him."

Behind a sprawling Tudor-style house, very black beams, mullioned windows, very white plaster, a long lawn sloped down to a lake with swans and rushes. Trees threw lacy shade on the grass, and on colorful flowerbeds. The women were colorful, too, in picture hats against the blazing sun. The men wore summer whites. Left-liberal campaign contributors, they held drinks and little bowls of strawberries in clotted cream. Untidy rows of folding chairs had been abandoned—the politicking was over. Dave spotted Catton and moved through the chatting, laughing crowd to stand waiting for

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him to quit scattering charm for a moment. When he did, Dave stepped in.

"What happened to you?" Catton frowned. "Accident?"

"Impatience," Dave said. "Not mine. Someone else's. They wanted that key I showed you, and they must have assumed I wouldn't give it to them if they simply asked."

"What did they want with it?" Catton led Dave aside. "I had the idea you didn't know what it was for."

"I do now. It fit a locker in a bus station. Not far from where Bess Jessup lived."

"That was where she had the drugs hidden?"

"Not drugs." Dave's head pounded. The heat was punishing. "A bunch of photocopies of documents from the nineteen-sixties—when you two lived together."

Catton looked blank. "Documents?"

"Letters from outfits like Students Against War."

Catton expelled a short, bewildered laugh. "Why would Bess have hung onto junk like that?"

"You tell me. You were in Students Against War."

"So were hundreds of decent kids." Catton looked worriedly across the lawn as if afraid of missing a chance to shake a hand. "What could it have to do with her death?"

"The five thousand wasn't for drugs," Dave said. "So what does that leave?"

"What? Sorry. Excuse me." Catton started away, up the grassy slope. "There's councilman Greevey."

"Wait," Dave said. "It leaves blackmail, right?"

"You've lost me," Catton said. Then his expression changed. "Hell, we destroyed the SAW papers. You see—"

"Andy Levitan told me," Dave said. "But obviously some escaped. He figures the police spy made copies and somehow Bess got hold of them. But he says the spy was Bob Broughton, and Broughton is dead. You can't blackmail a dead man."

"So it wasn't blackmail." Catton started off again.

"Unless the spy was someone else," Dave said. "Maybe all of you were mistaken about Broughton. It would be nice to know, wouldn't it?"

Catton halted, turned back. "There's no way. The police department is being sued right now. For undercover activities against political organizations." His smile was wry. "They never stop, do they? But it means the records will be sealed."

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"Not to everyone," Dave said. "I'll have Captain Ken Barker check them for me. He's an old friend. And he owes me. He's out of town today, but he'll be back tomorrow. I'll phone you, shall I? When he gives me the name?"

Catton was staring at Dave, but without seeing him. "What? Oh, yes. I mean, no." He made a despairing gesture with his hand. "Don't bother. I'll be honest with you. I took her the five thousand. Yes, she came to me and begged. You were right—I felt sorry for her. I felt even sorrier for her when I saw her at that miserable, torn-up apartment. Her face was a mass of cuts and bruises. But there was no blackmail. You can forget that part. And she was alive when I left her, soaking her face with cold towels."

"What time?" Dave said.

"A little after seven." Catton laid a trembling hand on Dave's arm. "You won't let it come out, will you? What I said at the airport is true—a candidate connected with a woman like that: voters wouldn't understand. At the scene of a murder, the night it happened? It would finish me. And what good would it do Bess?"

"I'll telephone you with that name," Dave said.

It was colder tonight, and damp. Rain was due. At sundown, clouds had blown in from the sea. They hung low and thick over the canyon now and made the darkness beneath the old oak complete. A bench circled the stout trunk of the oak. Ordinarily plants in pots occupied the bench, but Dave had set some of them on the ground. He sat on the bench, back against the oak, and waited. He wore two sweaters and a coat with a sheepskin lining, but the cold got through. He shivered, his head hurt, and he kept falling asleep.

He jerked awake and pushed up the thick sleeve at his wrist to read what had been his second-best watch. Ten past ten. Had he been wrong? It wouldn't be the first time, but it would surprise hell out of him. He pushed his cold hands into the slash pockets of the coat and dozed off again. He couldn't make out what woke him the next time. He looked at the front building, where he had left lamps on and a classical music station playing through the stereo. He wished he was in there with the fire blazing and a big globe of brandy.

He read his watch again. Five of eleven. The hell with it. He got up stiffly from the bench, yawned, started to raise his arms to stretch, when headlight beams crossed the dark, shaggy heads of the trees out front. The underside of a car scraped paving. Dave smiled thinly.

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He was always meaning to get the humpy drop from the road into his yard graded. The glow of headlights beyond the front building winked out. A car door closed. Dave stepped behind the trunk of the oak.

There was no scuffing of shoes on the bricks. The soles must be soft. But they still crackled dry leaves. Dave listened to them. A man appeared in silhouette against the door to the front building, a heavy old door with thick squares of glass. Something was odd-looking about the man's head. It took a second to understand—he was wearing a ski mask. He lifted a hand to press the button in the frame of the door. But he didn't use a finger or a thumb. He used the barrel of a gun. It glinted in the light that came out through the door. Dave launched himself at the man, caught his arm. He meant to twist the arm behind the man's back, make him drop the gun.

The man was stronger than he was. He used the leverage of Dave's grip on his arm to slam Dave hard against the shingle wall of the building. Dave's head met the wall with a crack. The pain was blinding. He went down. "You have to understand," the man said. Dave couldn't understand anything. He was only very dimly aware of being hauled to his feet, of the door opening, of himself a stagger of unaccountable legs into the room, where the softly glowing lamps reeled around him, slowly, sickeningly. He sprawled on a couch. "You have to understand," the man said again, and pulled off the ski mask.

"Ah," Dave said hollowly, trying to push himself into a sitting posture. "It *is* you."

"You're going to die," Catton said, "but you have to understand how it was." He sat on a couch that faced the one where Dave was. A coffee table was between them, Mexican pottery on it, painted terracotta, a wide-eyed cat with its paws tucked up, three jars of different sizes. "They had me on a dope charge. Marijuana. I was selling it on campus at LACC. They were going to lock me up forever unless I told them what was going on inside the movement."

"I'm in too much pain to cry," Dave said. "Let me tell you. Bess found out you were spying on your friends, selling out the peaceniks. That's why you left so suddenly for New York. She told you if you didn't go, she'd expose you. She loved you, or she'd have done it regardless."

"She hated me," Catton said. "I never saw such hate."

"Did you know she had a stack of material you'd stolen from Students Against War and the rest?"

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"Not until she came to me last week, asking for ten thousand dollars to pay that racketeering record producer. When I gave it to her, she'd give me the papers." Catton's laugh was bitter. "Everybody sells out. It just takes some of us a little longer."

"You only took her five thousand," Dave said.

Catton shrugged sourly. "What the hell. She was on her beam ends—a drug addict, a whore. Five thousand would look like a fortune to her."

"Why did you kill her?" Dave said.

"It was an accident. It was her fault. That rotten temper of hers. I asked her for the documents and she wouldn't give them up. She said she had them hidden in a safe place, and until I brought her the rest of the money they'd stay there. I started tearing the place apart to find them and she picked up this switchblade and went for me."

"And you tried to take it away from her?"

"We struggled. Some pimp had beat hell out of her but she was strong. The blade slid into her. I don't know how." Catton stared away numbly. "Christ, I didn't mean to kill her."

"But you went wearing gloves," Dave said. "Your prints aren't on that money. They're not on the sack."

"Just so she couldn't prove I gave it to her and wreck my campaign. I tell you, I never meant to hurt her."

"Only to save yourself," Dave said. "I understand."

"So do I," Ken Barker said. He came from behind the shadowy bar at the upper end of the long room. "Perfectly."

Catton scrambled to his feet and fired his gun. But wildly. Barker's gun went off at almost the same moment, and the impact of the bullet spun Catton around. He fell across the coffee table, knocking the Mexican pottery off, shattering it. He slumped from table to floor and lay still. Dave saw blood. Barker, a big-shouldered man with a broken nose and steel-grey hair, knelt over Catton, laid fingers on the candidate's neck below the jaw hinge. He looked up at Dave. "He's alive. Can you use a phone?"

"I can try." Dave pushed dizzily to his feet, tottered a few steps, picked up a receiver, punched buttons. While the phone rang at the other end of the line, Cecil came through the door at a run. That would make it midnight, the hour he always arrived home from work. Raindrops sparkled in his hair, and his eyes were round with alarm. "Fourth of July in here?" he said.

"Election day," Dave said.

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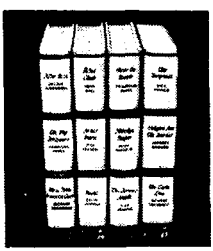

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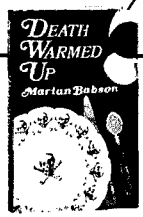

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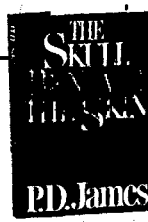

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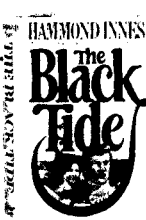

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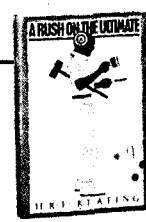

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